The background of the cover is a composite image. The upper portion shows a close-up of a hand in a dark sleeve holding a black handgun. The lower portion features a blurred, painterly image of a town with several houses. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of brown, gold, and orange.

SMASHED INTO PIECES

CLEAR WATER CREEK CHRONICLES, BOOK 2

SCARLET BLACKWELL

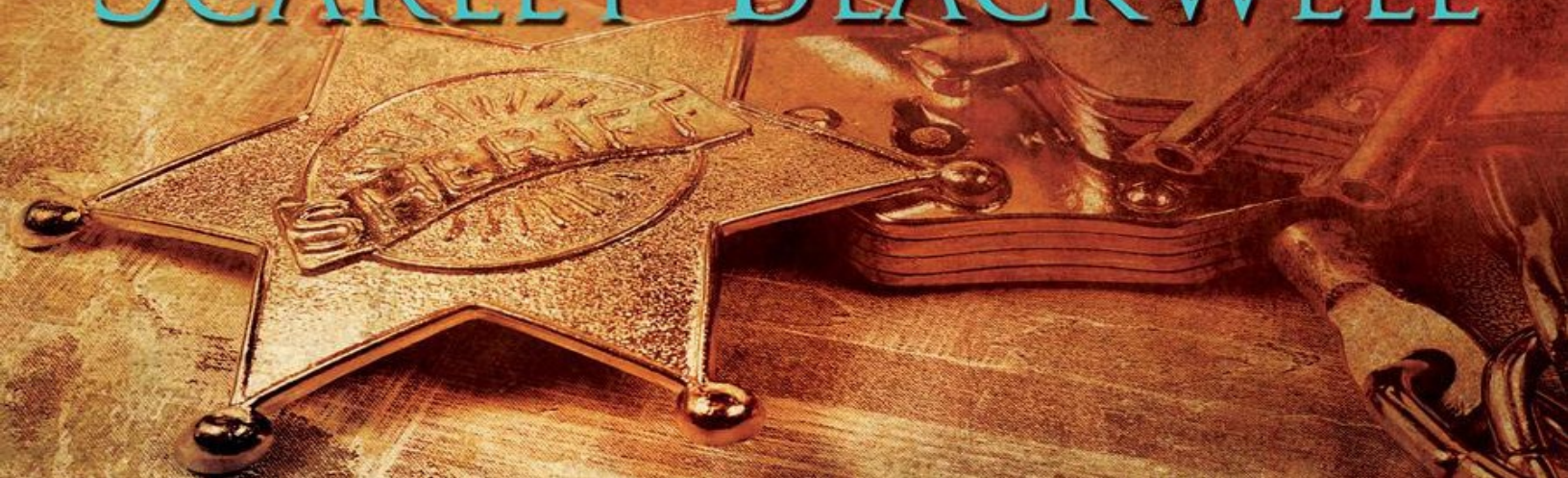


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Smashed Into Pieces

Clear Water Creek Chronicles 2

Scarlet Blackwell

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Chapter One

On his way home, Sheriff Brandon Schofield drove slowly down the rutted road leading to his house. The moon hung low over the trees, illuminating the clearing, shining on the glassy surface of the still lake.

It had been a long, busy shift. The day started off with a drunk driver on the highway and continued with a domestic assault and a shoplifting. The assault had been the hardest. Brandon had only been in post two months and some crimes were more emotive to him than others. He didn't want to see a wife battered by her husband, not when this town was so small that he rubbed shoulders with the guy in Bluey's bar on the weekend. That was not his idea of fun.

Reuben Baxter had been bailed out later that day and gone to stay with his brother after a stern warning from Brandon. Had he done this before? Mr Baxter wasn't talking, but her eye was black and she was clearly terrified of her husband. Reuben wouldn't be laying another finger on her because Brandon would be watching like a hawk from now on.

Something caught his attention—the silhouette of a man in the trees. What was he doing out here alone? He stood back turned, hands in front of him. Was he...?

Brandon's foot shifted to the brake. He pulled over, staring. He couldn't be, could he? He switched off the engine. Grimly, he got out, put his hat on and slammed the door before he walked into the trees, jaw set. Nobody got away with things like this on Brandon's beat. He had standards.

"Sir?"

The man turned his head, startled and cursed low under his breath before he fumbled at his pants.

"What are you doing, sir?" Brandon stepped closer.

"Ah, officer." The man turned around fully so the moonlight fell on his

features. He was very attractive; Brandon might have been on the job, but he wasn't blind. The fact that he was so handsome irritated Brandon further. Of average height with a lean body, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, he was dark-haired with eyes bleached of colour in the moonlight.

"I... got caught short." The man slurred his words.

Brandon squared his shoulders, trying not to dwell on the man's perfect face. "Are you drunk?"

"I've had a couple of beers. I came out for a walk and..."

"You thought you'd spoil an area of outstanding natural beauty by pissing on a two hundred year old oak tree?"

The man's small mouth tightened. "And you're wasting your time pulling me up for it? Don't you have doughnuts to eat or something?"

Brandon stepped forward furiously, his aim being to intimidate the smaller man, and it worked. He knew he was an imposing figure at six feet and all muscle, but he had never seen anyone virtually shrink back the way the stranger did now. He almost flinched like Brandon had leapt at him, one hand up as though he would defend himself.

What was this? First hand experience of police brutality or something more? Brandon frowned. His gaze was drawn to the man's right arm. A thick bandage ran from his wrist up beyond the sleeve of his t-shirt. His eyes moved back to the man's face, and he noticed a dark smudge on his jaw. A bruise.

Brandon folded his arms, looked the man steadily in the eye and watched the corresponding nervousness spring up on his face.

"What?"

"What did you do to your arm?"

"An accident." The man looked away.

"What kind of accident?"

"What the hell is this? Do you cross examine everyone you catch pissing on a tree this way or is it just me? Either arrest me or let me go, goddamn it!"

Brandon narrowed his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Finn Austen."

"Well congratulations, Mr Austen. I'm sheriff here, and you just talked your way into being my guest for the evening. Let's go." He grabbed the man's arm, reaching for his cuffs with the other hand.

Finn let out such a howl of pain at the contact that Brandon let go abruptly. Finn staggered back, face turned away, right arm cradled to his body. He leaned against the oak tree he had just defaced, breathing heavily.

Brandon hovered behind him, composure lost, uncertainty taking its place. His gaze lingered once more on the bandaged arm.

"You going to tell me what you did to it now?"

Finn turned his head. "Go to hell," he said between his teeth.

Brandon moved up right behind him so he breathed on the back of Finn's neck. The man trembled visibly, his left hand clutching the oak tree hard. This could go one of two ways. Either Brandon could continue to let Finn's rudeness wind him up and physically manhandle him into his car, or he could let it go and exercise some compassion.

"You know what? Because you're hurt, I'm going to let you go this once. But I tell you now, Mr Austen, if our paths cross once more and you behave like this, you're going to find yourself in a whole heap of trouble. Do you understand?"

He expected cursing or more smart comments. What he got was a curt nod. Brandon peered over Finn's shoulder, noting how he bit his lip and how his closed lashes trembled on his cheeks. Brandon had clearly hurt him. He guessed he should be the one apologising.

"Fine. Where do you live? I'll give you a ride home."

Finn shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was unsteady. "It's okay, I'm just over there." He motioned across the lake to the house standing alone.

Brandon was taken aback. He had seen lights on at the previously abandoned house—which stood directly across the lake from his own—for the past week but had never noticed a moving van or anyone unloading boxes. Nor

had he heard gossip about the house's new tenant. It seemed he had arrived like a ghost and lived like one too.

"Well, it's a long walk anyway in your condition. I'll take you. Come on." Brandon set off towards his car, looking back at Finn.

Finn turned around, watching him hesitantly before he followed, still cradling his arm. Brandon opened the passenger door for him, and Finn climbed in before Brandon helped pull the seatbelt across him. As he leaned close, he smelled Finn's scent. Fresh and pure like the ocean. For a moment it stirred aching memories in Brandon before Finn caught the buckle with his left hand and fastened it and Brandon moved back. He closed the door and went around to the driver's side.

Starting the engine, he turned the car around and set off around the lake. They drove in silence, broken only by low music from the car radio, a sad ballad Brandon liked and that he hummed to under his breath.

He bumped down the rutted road to Finn's house and drew up by the porch. No car was parked outside, and the windows were all dark. He glanced at Finn who made no move to get out. Brandon noticed him shivering and reached out to switch the heater on.

"Okay?" It was supposed to encourage Finn to get out of the car. Brandon was thinking about a glass of wine and a hot shower and was keen to leave, no matter how distracting this stranger was.

Finn nodded uncertainly. "Wish I'd left a light on. It's so... dark." Still he made no move to get out.

Brandon frowned, studied his face. He reached up and flicked on the car's light. "Want me to come in with you? Check everything's okay?"

Finn's gaze swung to his, and Brandon saw his face properly for the first time. He hadn't been wrong about his attractiveness; Finn was stunning. But his dark blue eyes were smudged black beneath with shadows like he hadn't slept in a week, and lines of worry etched themselves around his small, delicate mouth. Brandon estimated he was about thirty, but the strain he clearly carried put him

as older. The bruise on his jaw was starker in the light—purplish-blue and ugly.

"That would be great." Finn only made eye contact for a moment before he looked away.

Brandon flicked off the light. "Come on."

He followed Finn up to the house and waited while Finn unlocked the door and gestured him in. He looked around as they walked into the kitchen. The room was furnished but Brandon couldn't help noticing the place was bare. There were no plants on the window sill, no knick-knacks, no calendar pinned up or fridge magnets, no dishes draining beside the sink. It was as though Finn had arrived with no possessions, but then it had only been a week so maybe he had yet to unpack.

Finn hovered nervously in the middle of the room as Brandon went to the back door. He tried the handle, found it locked and made sure the two bolts at top and bottom were secure. They looked shiny and new. Had the previous owner had these, or had Finn put them on? He went to the windows and tested they were locked too.

He turned to face Finn. "Where do you keep the keys?"

"Upstairs in my bedside drawer."

"Okay. Want me to check the other windows?"

"Please." Finn didn't lead him out of the kitchen but stood aside so Brandon could go out first.

He went into the living room, flicking on the light. Voile drapes were closed over French windows at the back, and he pushed them aside to check the locks and peer into the empty back garden. A gate at the end was fitted unmistakably with a heavy padlock, and barbed wire topped the garden fence.

He pulled the curtain back across and went to the front windows, glancing at Finn who stood in the doorway. "Are all these locks new?" He checked the window locks and drew back, glancing around the room, noting it bare apart from couch, coffee table and lamp.

"Yeah, I..." Finn stammered a little over his words. "I... kind of worry

about security."

Brandon regarded him. "You don't have to worry about that around here. People leave their houses and cars unlocked. Burglary is rare. And besides, you don't look like you brought anything with you to steal."

Finn reddened. He lowered his gaze to the wood floor, studying his shoes.

"Want me to look upstairs?"

Finn shook his head without making eye contact. He looked miserable and defeated.

Brandon hesitated, deeply unsettled. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Do you want some c-coffee?" He stuttered incongruously as though the word had a distressing connotation for him.

This was a turnaround from Finn's previously aggressive behaviour, and Brandon couldn't work it out. "It's kind of late, and it's been a long day. I have to go."

He stepped towards Finn to leave the room and noticed yet again how Finn shrank back as though afraid, moving hurriedly out into the hall to let Brandon pass.

Brandon went to the front door. He noticed it had three bolts on it and a heavy duty lock. He opened it and stepped out onto the porch.

Finn stood at the door, right arm held up across his chest.

"Do you have some painkillers?" Brandon asked.

Finn nodded.

"You take care now," Brandon said and descended the steps down to his car.

The door closed behind him. He heard the bolts slide firmly into place, and he got in his car and sat looking at the house.

Did Finn have somebody particular he was trying to keep out of the house, or was he just a nervous wreck all the time? Was he so afraid of being alone that he would ask the sheriff who'd almost arrested him to stay for coffee? And yet, if he was some sort of agoraphobic nut job, what was he doing wandering around

the woods at eight at night, drunk and taking a leak on a tree?

Brandon started the engine and drove away. He thought about how he had grabbed Finn's wounded arm, and pangs of guilt pricked at him. He thought of how afraid Finn had been over Brandon's mere proximity and wondered how that fear had started.

Chapter Two

Jonah Mitchell, Brandon's deputy, was bent over his keyboard typing furiously next morning when Brandon got to work.

"Hey there. Coffee's on." Jonah gestured to the pot and Brandon went to help himself. Jonah was a good guy who seemed to have accepted his new boss well, and they had a harmonious working relationship.

"How's the little one?" Brandon sipped at his coffee. Jonah's young baby had been ill with croup over the weekend and been hospitalised for a couple of days.

"Oh he's good now. Thanks, Brandon."

Brandon sat at his desk and eyed his inbox. "That's great."

"Listen, Laura and I would like to have you over for dinner one night."

Brandon smiled. "Sure, Jonah, I'd like that." He fell silent, pulling a couple of envelopes from the box but making no attempt to open them.

"Something on your mind?"

"Kind of. Did you know someone had moved into the place across the lake from me?" That house had history. Brandon didn't know the full story. He only knew someone had been shot there and the house's tenant, Eden Gray, had gone on trial for murder. When he was found not guilty, he had left town with Sean Keller, Brandon's predecessor.

"Eden's old place you mean? Yeah, I did. He's been there about a week."

"What do you know about him?"

Jonah shrugged. "Not much. Someone told me he arrived in the dead of night and didn't bring any stuff with him. He keeps himself to himself. I've seen him at the store once."

"I almost arrested him last night."

Jonah looked astonished. "What for?"

"Pissing on a tree, drunk."

Jonah chuckled. "You're a hardass like Sean."

"Am I?"

"Yeah, he wouldn't have stood for that either."

Brandon smiled. "Sean and this Eden guy, what was going on there?"

"A love affair I guess. It was complicated. There was a lot of history between them."

"Jonah," Brandon hesitated. "You know I'm gay too, don't you?"

"I kind of figured that out when Old Man Jones's daughter came over to report that accident and she leaned over your desk in the tightest, lowest-cut top I've ever seen and you didn't bat an eyelid."

Brandon's face heated.

"Jesus Christ, she almost offered it on a plate and all you could say was, 'Thanks very much for coming, ma'am'. I knew you batted for the other team at that point."

Brandon pushed his chair back and put his feet up on the desk. "I hope you don't have a problem with that, Jonah."

"Hell no. Some people in this town might. I'm not one of them."

"Glad to hear it."

"So you were telling me about this guy peeing on the tree?"

"Yeah. Have you seen that bandage he wears?"

"I've seen him coming out of the doctor's office. I guess he has it looked after."

"Any idea what happened?"

"None at all."

"It's painful, I know that. I grabbed his arm to cuff him, and it really hurt him." Brandon rubbed his face as even now, the guilt speared him. "I felt so bad that I let him off and gave him a ride home. When we got there, he seemed frightened of being in the house alone. He had me check the place out, and he's got all these bolts on his doors."

"Fred Davies told me he went over there and fitted a ton of locks this

week," Jonah said.

Brandon regarded him a moment. "What do you think?"

"That he's running from something?"

"Me too."

* * * *

Brandon went out on a couple of visits mid-morning before he stopped off at the bakery in town for some lunch for him and Jonah. As he got out of his car, he saw Naomi Brooks, the nurse practitioner, just leaving the doctor's office. Brandon was on friendly terms with her and although he knew she was interested in him, he tried to remain oblivious until the right time to tell her. Now though would be the right time to capitalise on her interest.

"Hi, there," he greeted her.

"Hi, Brandon, how are you doing?" Naomi was a petite blonde with a stunning figure and cornflower blue eyes. There was nothing not to like. It was almost a shame Brandon was gay.

"Just fine. Been busy?" Brandon leaned against the wall lazily, giving off an air like he had all the time in the world to chat.

"Not too bad."

"I saw a patient of yours last night."

"Oh?"

"Finn Austen."

"Ah, yes."

"He seemed in a lot of pain. I was kind of worried."

Naomi didn't reply. She merely watched Brandon carefully, squinting in the sun.

"What happened to his arm anyway?"

"Come on, you know better than that."

"Naomi, I'm a police officer, you're allowed to tell."

Naomi shook her head. "I'm not telling you jack, Brandon, unless Finn gives his permission."

"What's the big secret? He hurt his arm; I only want to know how."

"Then ask him yourself. If he won't tell you, he obviously doesn't want you to know."

"Look..." Brandon moved closer, hemming Naomi into the wall, looking down at her from his greater height. "Who am I going to tell?" His voice was soft, wheedling. He kept his eyes fixed on hers.

"Brandon, you can bat those big brown puppy dog eyes at me all you want. I might think you're hot, but you're not worth losing my licence over."

Brandon stepped back. "I'm offended," he huffed.

"Shut up. Why don't you buy me a coffee to make up for being a transparent asshole?"

Brandon smiled sheepishly. He led the way to the bakery.

* * * *

"Naomi wouldn't tell me how Finn hurt his arm," he told Jonah back at the station. "That makes me even more suspicious."

"Hmm." Jonah looked thoughtful. "I'll keep my ears open. I bet somebody knows and is willing to tell. You know how this town likes gossip. If I run into Dr Wright, I should be able to get it out of him. He's known me since I was a kid and always helps me out."

"Good," Brandon said, and he sat at his desk with his thoughts straying back to that empty house and the man who seemed held prisoner inside it by his own fear.

Chapter Three

The next afternoon after work, Brandon was in the pharmacy looking for something for his headache. He had just plucked some Tylenol from the shelf when he glanced up at the line for prescriptions at the back of the store. He recognised the man in the white t-shirt by the bandage on his arm.

Brandon hovered in the aisle as Finn took delivery of a bag and handed over some cash. He ducked into the next aisle as Finn took his change and left the store. Brandon put the Tylenol back and followed him out.

"Finn."

Finn stopped dead outside the store, shoulders stiffening. He turned around, face etched with wariness.

"Hi," Brandon offered.

"Hello, sheriff." Finn's voice was cold.

"How's your arm?" Brandon gestured to the bandage.

Finn's face drew ever more closed. "Fine, thanks." He turned to go.

"Hey." Brandon followed him a few steps.

Finn turned again, clearly irritated.

"I just... wanted to say sorry for... grabbing your arm. I didn't realise how sore it was."

Finn bent his head and looked at the ground. "That's okay. You weren't to know."

"Going to tell me what happened yet?"

"No. Is there anything else?" Finn lifted his head, staring defiantly.

"Yes. If you... need me for anything, you can find me at the station."

"And what would I need you for, sheriff?"

"You tell me." Brandon stared back. "You're the one locked in your house trying to keep someone out."

Finn flinched as though slapped. He swallowed and blinked. He seemed to

be about to say something before he turned abruptly and walked away.

Sighing, Brandon watched him go. That hadn't gone well. He should have handled Finn a bit more carefully. He seemed like a man in need of the most tender care. And Brandon was hardly an expert on that, much as he'd like to be. He'd done nothing but sleep around since a long-term relationship ended three years ago, and knew he was unlikely to find anything meaningful in such a small, insular town as this. Unless you counted the undeniably beautiful Finn Austen, but Brandon didn't intend to start thinking that way about the reclusive, obviously damaged, new tenant of the house across the lake from him. Those kinds of ideas would do him no good at all.

He got into his car, the headache forgotten, and started the engine. Finn had reached the very bottom of the road, carrying the paper bag of drugs in one hand, walking slowly.

Brandon considered offering him a ride again but then treating him like an invalid would probably only raise Finn's hackles further. He drove right by Finn, watching him in his side mirror as he disappeared from view.

Finn's ocean scent had reminded Brandon of his ex, Josh, who'd like to surf and swim. He and Brandon had lived in California under the idyllic sun for two years until Josh's fondness for other surfers had turned into full blown infidelity and Brandon had left him. He still didn't know what failing in him had caused Josh to look at other men, and this insecurity and hurt had never left him.

Perhaps coming all this way to Clear Water Creek was another example of Brandon trying to bury himself into his work and forget his loneliness. He wasn't sure, but what he did know was Finn Austen had stirred him dangerously against his will and he didn't like it.

* * * *

His arm throbbed but Finn had no water to take his painkillers with so he plodded on towards home. The sun beat down on the back of his neck, and he

felt faint. This was probably a result of taking the earlier painkillers on an empty stomach that morning but he kind of liked the spaced out feeling they gave him. Even better if he mixed them with alcohol.

He watched the sheriff's car disappear into the distance. It was a long walk in this kind of heat, and he could have probably gotten a ride if he'd been more sociable. But the sheriff had done enough poking around Finn's business, and loose talk cost lives as far as he could see. *His* life.

The cop had offered Finn help though, hadn't he? Protection, by the sounds of it and sure, Finn needed it and wanted it, but he wouldn't let himself feel more vulnerable, more goddamn emasculated than he already was. Not this time. This time he was done. He was on his own, and it was time to look after himself.

He sat down suddenly at a bus stop as a wave of nausea consumed him and let his head hang between his knees. He was never going to make it home at this rate. He coughed, his ribs hurting.

He looked up as a car purred to a halt beside him. "Are you okay, sir?"

It was a cop car but not the sheriff's. He'd seen the guy inside around town. "I'm fine."

"You don't look so good. Why don't I take you home?"

Finn hesitated. Had the sheriff been discussing his personal business with his fellow cop? He couldn't afford to turn down this ride. The way he felt, he was going to pass out any minute. He stood up unsteadily and walked to the car, opening the passenger door and sliding inside gratefully. The air conditioning made the interior icy cold, and Finn almost sighed in relief as he sat back, eyes closed.

"I'm Jonah Mitchell, deputy sheriff."

"Finn Austen."

"I know. My boss told me he'd met you the other night."

There it was. These two were in cahoots, scheming against Finn. He stiffened in his seat but said nothing as Jonah headed around the lake.

"He had some concerns."

"Excuse me?"

"About your arm."

"My arm's being treated by a doctor. What the hell's it got to do with your sheriff?"

"Relax. As I said, he's only concerned. Not just about your arm but about your... security issues at home."

"All right, you can let me out here."

"Come on, Finn, don't be so defensive. He wouldn't be doing his job if he didn't wonder what was going on with you."

"Really? I think he's just a nosy bastard who needs to butt out of other people's lives." Finn looked out of the window, seething.

Jonah laughed shortly without mirth. "Well you can think that, but he has me wondering about you as well, so that's two of us who're going to be on your case."

Finn didn't speak. He jammed his knuckles against his eyes.

"Where have you come from?"

"I can't tell you."

"Are you working?"

"No."

"You do realise we'll run a criminal check on you, don't you?" Jonah made it sound like a threat.

"You can. I haven't broken any laws." Finn's throat swelled with misery. If it wasn't the sheriff and his deputy, it was the nosy store owner or Dr Wright and Naomi Brooks. Why couldn't everyone leave him alone? He had chosen a small town and was realising quickly that it was a bad move. He needed to move to the city, a metropolis that would swallow him up. But he was so tired he couldn't run anymore.

Jonah pulled up outside Finn's house. "Show me some ID, Finn."

Glowering, Finn pulled his wallet out and handed over his driver's licence.

Jonah glanced at it and handed it back.

Finn opened the door. Ungratefully, he slammed it without a word and climbed the steps to the porch. Great, Jonah now knew where he had once lived. It would soon be game over.

Chapter Four

"I gave your pal a lift home yesterday."

"What?" Brandon looked up from his computer.

"Finn. He was sitting at a bus stop looking like shit."

Brandon kept his gaze firmly on Jonah's, waiting for more.

"I asked him a few questions, but he gave nothing away. Apart from his driver's licence." Jonah smirked. "He's from Iowa. He's thirty-one. I looked him up."

"And?" Brandon was all ears.

"He's who he says he is. No criminal convictions."

"What the hell is he doing here all the way from Iowa?"

"He wasn't registered at the address on his driver's licence. That house is owned by a Dominic Bateman. Finn's last known address was ten years ago with his mother in Des Moines."

Brandon looked out of the window, deep in thought. Finn lived with a man? Was he gay? "Did you call his mother?"

"No. I thought you might want to do it."

Brandon chewed his lip. "I'm not sure. What if he doesn't want his mother to know where he is?"

Jonah shrugged. "Up to you, Brandon." He pushed a sheet of paper across the desk. "Here's his mom's address and phone number, and here's the guy's he was living with."

* * * *

By the end of the day, Brandon still hadn't decided whether to call Finn's mother and get the tale straight from the horse's mouth. Perhaps Finn was running from his mother. Maybe he'd come out as gay and she couldn't handle it,

so he'd moved away. But Finn wasn't a teenager, he was an adult. He couldn't have done anything that bad that he needed to hide from his mother, could he? And who was the man he had lived with in Iowa? Did he know Finn was here?

He decided to put it off. At least until he had given Finn the chance to explain himself.

He was on his way home when a call came through from dispatch. "Brandon, Rosaline Baxter rang. She was screaming and crying. I couldn't get anything out of her before she hung up."

Brandon did a screeching U-turn and flicked on his sirens. "Call Jonah to meet me there. And the paramedics."

"Already done it."

Brandon was cold with fury all the way to the Baxter place. Had Reuben really done it again? Had he really dared to hurt his wife after Brandon's warning?

They were the nearest house to Finn's, about a hundred yards further down the road. As Brandon turned onto the road, a figure darted in front of his car from the porch of the Baxters's residence.

He skidded to a halt and flung open his door, leaving the engine running. He chased Reuben Baxter into the trees, caught him by the shoulder and threw him to the ground. "You have the right to remain silent—"

"Fuck off."

Brandon cuffed him and dragged Reuben to his feet. "Let's go." He shoved Reuben into the back of his car and locked him in. He looked up as he sensed someone watching him. Standing at the hood of his car was Finn.

"I heard the noise. Was he... beating his wife?"

"Go home, Finn." Brandon brushed past him brusquely and headed into the house.

The scene inside was chaos. He followed a trail of broken glass and shattered china into the living room. Crouched against the far wall like a wounded animal was Rosaline Baxter, her blouse ripped and blood-stained, her

eyes swollen and bruised, her mouth bleeding.

Brandon bent down. "It's okay," he said softly, holding his hand out.

Rosaline took it. He gathered her to her feet and put his arm around her as he led her out.

Jonah drew up as they descended the steps, an ambulance behind him. The paramedics took Rosaline, while Jonah peered inside Brandon's car.

"That son of a bitch. We're going to lock him up and throw away the fucking key this time Brandon."

"If she presses charges," Brandon said cynically.

"Are you joking? What person in their right mind would stay and take this shit for however many years he's been dishing it out without doing something about it?"

Brandon glanced up the road towards the house where Eden Gray had shot a friend of the previous sheriff. "I don't think it's that simple, Jonah."

"Well it should be."

"Will you take him back? I have a visit to make."

"Sure."

Brandon left his car where it was and walked up the road to the house overlooking the lake. He glanced across at his own house, wondering if Finn had ever stood on his porch looking over at Brandon's house the way Brandon had done for the last couple of nights. He climbed the steps and knocked on the door.

Hesitant steps sounded, and the safety chain rattled on. "Who is it?" The door opened an inch, and a sapphire blue eye blinked at him.

"It's Sheriff Schofield, Finn," Brandon said softly.

The door closed. Brandon stood there a moment, deadly silence from the other side before suddenly the chain rattled again, bolts slid back and the door opened.

"What do you want?" Finn's tone was unfriendly. Deathly pale, he wore a long, black sweater that was too big for him. It made his lean body look small and fragile.

"I just came to see how you are."

"I'm fine. Is she okay?" He looked anxiously down the road.

"She's all right. She's being checked over at the hospital."

Finn bit his lip. "That bastard. Isn't it the worst thing a man can do? To hit a woman?"

Brandon nodded silently. "I never introduced myself, Finn. My name's Brandon."

Finn continued to look wary. He didn't hold his hand out. "Hello, Brandon."

"Jonah said you didn't look so good after I left you yesterday."

"I was just fine. Look, what do you want?"

"I told you. To see how you are."

"And I told you I'm okay. Now if you don't mind—"

"Why did you leave Iowa?"

"What the hell is this? Do you treat every fucking new arrival in town like a goddamn criminal? Well, you did your background check and found nothing on me, did you sheriff? So why don't you fuck off and bug some other guy?" Finn was flushed with fury, his eyes glittering.

Undeterred, Brandon asked, "Who's Dominic Bateman?"

Finn went so white that Brandon expected him to pass out. He slammed the door in Brandon's face.

Brandon descended the steps and walked back down the road slowly to his car, ready for a long evening filling out paperwork.

Chapter Five

Jonah called at nine in the morning and ruined Brandon's day off. "Mrs Baxter won't press charges."

"What?" Brandon gripped the phone and stared across his garden, reliving the terror on the face of the woman he had taken from the house. "I'll go speak to her."

"Don't bother. She's at her sister's, who's guarding her like a Rottweiler. No one's allowed in."

"Jesus Christ." Brandon heaved a furious sigh. "What's wrong with her? I don't understand these people."

"You do understand, Brandon. You've been in this job long enough to have seen it time and time again. People'll stay with an abusive partner until they kill them. I'm sure you've seen that too."

"I've seen it." Brandon's jaw clenched tight. "I don't want to see it again."

"Give it a couple of days, then try with her again."

"I will. He's not getting away with it, Jonah. He better lie low because if I see him in town..."

"I know. Me too. See you, Brandon." He hung up.

Brandon was restless and unsettled now. His thoughts flitted between Rosaline Baxter and Finn. He didn't want to put a name to what he suspected Finn had gone through. He didn't want Finn to be the same as Rosaline Baxter.

He did some housework for an hour and then finally slapped some sun cream and a hat on and left his house. He walked down to the lake, trying not to stare too obviously at Finn's windows. A couple swam off the opposite bank, frolicking and giggling, but Brandon had this one to himself.

He laid his towel out, stripped down to his swimming shorts and waded in. The cool water invigorated Brandon as soon as he started to swim. As the sun reflected off the windows of Finn's house, Brandon wondered just what had gone

on in there. Even the gossips in town hadn't given him the full details about Eden Gray's act of murder and his relationship with Sheriff Sean Keller. Now another troubled man had taken Eden's place. A man Brandon couldn't stop thinking about for one second.

It was pointless to allow his thoughts to become anything more than protective. Thinking about Finn in a romantic way was doomed from the start.

He stopped, treading water, three quarters of the way towards the opposite bank. The pair of swimmers had dried off and dressed and were now walking away hand in hand. A motorboat droned at the other end of the lake.

Something caught Brandon's attention. A movement in the trees towards his right, where the cover was thickest. A figure emerged and looked around before he stripped his t-shirt off and waded into the water in shorts.

Brandon sank down so only his nose and eyes showed above the water. Finn didn't appear to have seen him. He stood thigh-deep in the water. Brandon's eyes travelled over his pale, naked torso. Finn was thinner than Brandon first thought. His stomach was flat and his ribs stuck out and were peppered with multi-coloured bruises. Brandon stared at the bandage on Finn's arm. Held on with clear tape, it rose to his armpit and tracked across the top of his chest as far as the centre. The wound, whatever it was, was far more extensive than it had first appeared.

Brandon's throat felt tight. Rather than inciting lust, Finn's half-naked body did nothing but fill him with pity. He started to swim towards Finn.

Finn spotted him immediately and retreated hurriedly from the water. Brandon noticed a pronounced limp for the first time. He called to Finn and waded ashore as Finn took a towel. He held it up to his throat, covering his torso as though he were afraid, or ashamed of something.

"I can't get away from you, can I, sheriff?"

"No. Where did you get the bruises, Finn?"

"An accident."

"The same accident when you hurt your arm?"

"Yes."

"It must have been a terrible accident."

Finn blinked several times. His mouth tightened. "It was."

As always, his eyes were wary, watchful. They made Brandon think suddenly of the 'frozen watchfulness' on the face of an abused child. Something he had learned in child protection training and that he had seen first hand on too many occasions.

"And if I undressed you, would I find bruises on the rest of your body too from this... *accident*?"

Finn flushed, glaring. "You're not going to be undressing me any time soon sheriff, so that question's kind of irrelevant."

He turned around and bent down to get his bag. Brandon found himself staring at a criss-cross pattern of faded scars on his back. His gaze moved down Finn's long, thin legs to a ridged scar on his left ankle.

"What happened to your ankle?"

Finn straightened up. He pulled his t-shirt on, wincing as it went over his injured arm. "I broke it."

"Don't tell me. An accident. You're terribly accident prone, Finn."

Finn grew pale, his expression suddenly earnest. "Please, sheriff. Leave me alone. I haven't done anything wrong." His dark blue eyes were beseeching, desperate.

Brandon stepped closer and saw the instant fear. He kept his voice calm and soft. "Finn, I only want to help you, that's all. You can trust me. I promise."

Finn shook his head vehemently. "I don't need any help. And I can't trust anyone. Not even myself." He hoisted his bag over his left shoulder, picked up his shoes and walked away quickly.

Brandon stood watching him go, resisting the urge to follow Finn to his house and make him spill his story.

* * * *

When Finn reached the house he took the damp towel from his bag and

hung it over a chair to dry. Then he paced the kitchen, pulling at his hair. Damn the cop. Damn him to hell with his beautiful brown eyes and gentle words. Finn didn't need this. He didn't need to look at his first man in ten years and wonder what it would be like. He couldn't allow himself to even hope that he had any sort of future with anyone else. Not now. Finn might as well have been the walking dead. How he had survived, he didn't know. He didn't know how he would continue to survive and counted each precious hour he had left before his past caught up with him.

He coughed and his ribs hurt him. He continued to feel unwell but still put his bouts of dizziness down to taking his painkillers on an empty stomach. Finn survived on little food. He had no appetite at all, which was just as well considering the money he had stolen when he ran away wasn't going to last forever.

He sat down abruptly as a sudden flash of heat overtook him. He put a hand to his forehead. Christ, it was burning. He held onto the furniture to get to the sink and got himself a glass of water before fumbling some of his medication from the bag and a box of Tylenol from the cupboard. His dressings were due to be changed at the doctor's tomorrow, so he'd mention the last couple of days of nausea and dizziness and this sudden fever. Right now, though, he needed to lie down.

He caught hold of the chair in front of him as his legs went suddenly from under him. He fell, banged his forehead on the back of the chair and pulled it over with him as he sprawled onto the floor.

Lying there still conscious, he blinked, looking around. His limbs wouldn't move and his chest burned when he coughed. *Oh no. This would be just my luck. If I survived all this, only to fall to some disease or other.* He almost laughed, but the racking cough prevented it. He turned his head to the side and saw the flecks of blood stain the floor. At that moment, he almost wished the nosy cop would turn up again.

Chapter Six

Brandon brooded over Finn all night and finally went over to the medical practice the next day and asked to see Dr Wright, waiting patiently until he was free. Brandon had met the doctor a few times in passing but had not had the need to consult him personally so far.

Dr Wright, a kindly man in his sixties with thick, horn-rimmed glasses, shook Brandon's hand and bade him sit down. "What can I do for you, sheriff? Is this a professional visit?"

"Yes it is. I'd like to enquire about one of your patients, Finn Austen. I believe he's seeing you for wound dressings."

Dr Wright looked wary. "He is."

"What sort of wound is it?"

Dr Wright hesitated. Already Brandon knew he would meet resistance here, just as he had with Naomi. "A scald."

"A scald?"

"A burn made by hot liquid or vapour."

"I know what a scald is. How did he do it?"

The doctor sat back in his chair. "What is this, sheriff?"

"Humour me. Did he say it was an accident?"

"Yes."

"What was it? Water?"

"Yes."

"And in your professional capacity, Doctor, how many accidental scalds of this nature have you seen? Is it easy for an adult to accidentally pour boiling water down their arm and across their chest?"

Dr Wright sighed. He took his glasses off and massaged his eyes. "No, sheriff."

"So have you asked him about it?"

"Of course I have. He doesn't speak. I've only seen him a couple of times. You would be better speaking to Naomi."

"Already have. She won't say a word."

"Then what can we do?"

"Have you seen him with his shirt off, Doctor? The bruises on his ribs and the scars on his back? The way he walks with a limp?"

"Yes."

"He's hiding here from someone who did this to him."

Dr Wright remained silent.

"I want to help him, but I don't know how to get him to open up."

"Give him time. Let him learn to trust you. Show him he *can* trust you."

Brandon nodded, lost in thought. He stood. "Thanks for your time, Doctor."

The doctor showed him out and as Brandon was leaving, he almost ran into Naomi leaving her office on the corridor.

"Hi, Naomi."

"Hi, Brandon." Naomi glanced back at Dr Wright's office. "Professional visit?"

"Yeah."

Her expression darkened. "I hope you're not still poking around over Finn."

"Yes, I am, Naomi. I saw him yesterday at the lake with his shirt off. I see the look on his face every time I stand too close to him, so don't tell me not to poke around. I'll poke around until I find out what he's so terrified about."

She sighed. "All right. Why don't you go over and see him then? He didn't show for his appointment this morning. I want to be sure he's okay."

Brandon nodded tightly. "On my way."

* * * *

All the way to Finn's, Brandon had an irrational fear that something terrible had happened to stop him attending his appointment that morning. Namely that Finn's demons had caught up with him, either literally or metaphorically, and some harm had come to him.

He parked outside Finn's house and got out of his car, ascending the steps and knocking on the door. He waited, knocked again. Then he cupped his hands to the frosted glass and peered through.

He saw down the hall and into the kitchen. A dark shape lay motionless on the floor.

Brandon cursed, his heart hammering suddenly with dread. He put his shoulder to the door, already knowing the bolts would be in place and it wouldn't budge. He ran around to the back of the house and scaled the gate, ripping his pants on the barbed wire and cutting one hand.

He didn't stop to curse Finn and his security. He withdrew his nightstick and shielded his face before he smashed the French window then reached in to unlock it.

He stepped into the house and hurried into the kitchen. "Finn?" He crouched down by the supine body.

Finn lay unconscious, deathly pale with spots of blood on his mouth. "Finn?" Brandon passed a hand over his brow and found it burning hot. Jesus Christ. He glanced around for the key to the front door.

There it was, right there on the table. That wasn't very security conscious of Finn. He rushed to unbolt and unlock the door and swung it open before hurrying back to Finn and scooping him up in his arms Brandon carried him to the front door and down the steps to his car.

Finn stirred in his arms He came back to groggy consciousness before he started to thrash, terror on his face.

"Hey, relax." Brandon got his door open and laid Finn on the back seat, leaning over him. "Listen to me. I found you on the kitchen floor. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"I'm not going to the hospital!" Finn cried, sitting up.

"Yes you are."

"I'm not, you can't make me!" Finn threw himself across the seat to the other door but found it locked from the inside.

"Finn." Brandon climbed in beside him, keeping his voice low. "You're sick. You've got a fever and you look terrible. You need some medical treatment. Let me help you."

Finn's blue eyes glittered wildly. He held his injured arm protectively across his body. "I won't let you take me back there! I won't go back to Iowa!"

"Finn, you're confused and you're sick." Brandon slid closer to him. Finn flinched away when he reached out a hand. "I'm Brandon, you know me. I would never do anything to hurt you. You have to believe that."

Finn stared at him. "Don't take me back there."

"I won't. Why don't you ride up front with me then you can see where we're going?" Brandon slid out of the car. He walked around and opened the passenger door. Finn climbed out of the car and followed him. He wheezed for breath and coughed, spitting some blood onto the ground. Brandon caught him in his arms as he almost fell.

"It's okay, I've got you," he said as he held Finn up against the car.

Finn trembled violently in his arms. Heat radiated off his feverish body. "Don't leave me, don't leave me..." he mumbled.

"I won't." Brandon helped Finn into the car. "I'm going to lock your front door. I'll be two seconds." He closed Finn's door, ran back up the porch and secured the front door. Then he went back to his car and jumped in, finding Finn asleep in the passenger seat.

Brandon started the engine, turned the car around and drove slowly down the rutted road. He radioed Jonah.

"I'm taking Finn to the hospital. I just found him passed out on the floor in his kitchen. I had to break in. I need you to secure the back window. Watch yourself on the barbed wire." He glanced at the cut on the palm of his hand and

the smears of blood he'd left on the steering wheel.

"Is he okay?"

"He's got a fever and a cough. I'll talk to you later."

Brandon looked over towards Finn as he pulled onto the road out of town, heading for the freeway. He looked so washed-out and wan slumped there. So broken and beaten. A murderous anger rose without warning in Brandon so he clenched the wheel hard. He had to find out who'd done this to Finn and he had to make him pay.

Chapter Seven

Brandon glanced impatiently around the curtain to his cubicle while his hand was dressed. "Do you know how much longer it's going to be before I can see him?" he asked the nurse treating him.

"Be patient, they're working on him. He's going to be okay."

He sighed.

"Has he got insurance?"

"I doubt it. I'll pay whatever it is."

The nurse finished his dressing with a final piece of tape. "Come with me, I'll show you where you can wait."

Brandon sat in a tastefully decorated room with leaflets about organ donation and boxes of tissues. He'd sat in a dozen of these different rooms over the course of his career. He'd never cared quite so much before though.

He poured some coffee and sat down, staring at the Monet print on the wall until the door opened. A young blonde woman entered. "Sheriff, I'm Doctor Anisa Buchan."

He shook her hand. "How is he?"

She sat opposite him. "He appears to have a left-sided pneumonia and he's dehydrated. We've started him on antibiotics and fluids. His oxygen levels were very low. I think if you hadn't brought him when you did, we'd be looking at intubation and ICU, but as it is, he's going to go up to the medical floor, and we'll observe him there for a few days."

Brandon took all this in gratefully, not speaking.

"What's the story with all his injuries? We took the dressings off his arm."

Brandon sighed. "I haven't yet got the story from him. He arrived in Clear Water Creek a little over a week ago from Iowa. I've met him a few times and tried to get him to give it up, but he just says he was in an accident. His house is like a fortress, and he's afraid of people. I went over today because he didn't

show up for his nurse's appointment, and found him passed out on the kitchen floor."

Doctor Buchan nodded. "I want you to come with me, Sheriff; I need to show you something."

Brandon followed her out of the room and down the corridor, past the resuscitation room where he had seen Finn taken. The doctor pulled out a chair for Brandon at a desk then sat down herself and logged onto a computer.

An X-ray came up on screen.

"This is Finn's chest X-ray. There's the infection." Her finger passed over the areas of white on the left lung. Can you see anything else unusual about this X-ray, Sheriff?"

Brandon squinted. "I'll be honest with you, Doctor, my field of expertise doesn't lie in reading X-rays."

She smiled. "Fractured ribs. Here, here, here and here. An old fractured clavicle, there."

Brandon went cold. He sat staring at Finn's broken bones.

"As he wasn't in a fit state to refuse consent, I took the liberty of X-raying the rest of him." She clicked the mouse. "Left arm. Nothing there. Right arm. Old fractures to the humerus and radius."

Brandon lowered his head, eyes closed.

"Left leg. Old fractured lateral malleolus. Old fractured shaft of femur. Do you know how much force it takes to fracture a femur, Sheriff?"

Brandon shook his head, not looking at the X-ray.

"We usually see them most commonly in motorbike accidents. Do you think he was in a traffic accident to cause all these injuries?"

"No I don't, Doctor. I think someone inflicted these purposefully on him. I think he's running away from an abusive relationship."

Doctor Buchan sighed. "I can get psych to review him once he's more stable."

"Thank you."

"If you go wait back in the relatives' room, I'll get someone to take you up to the medical floor once he's moved. Shouldn't be too long."

Brandon shook her hand. "Thanks very much."

He sat staring at the Monet water lilies once more. That black and white image of bones had shown him everything he needed to know. It hadn't lied, Finn had.

* * * *

Finn was settled in his own room when his nurse showed Brandon in half an hour later. He lay still under crisp white sheets, an oxygen mask over his face, a cardiac monitor attached to his bare chest. Brandon pulled a chair up to the side of his bed and looked down at the IV running into the crook of Finn's elbow.

Finn's left hand lay on the sheet, delicate and long-fingered, the nails short and neat. Brandon stared. Finn wore a gold ring on his third finger.

Brandon's heart plummeted. How had he never noticed this? Was Finn married? Was he married to the man he had lived with? He was pretty sure same-sex marriage was legal in Iowa. Or perhaps he was married to a woman but lived with some relative of hers who beat him. Maybe the two of them beat Finn together.

His fingers hovered over Finn's hand. He let his fingertips graze soft skin and touch the gold band. Finally he rested his palm over Finn's hand and entwined his fingers with his. He lowered his head to the bed and closed his eyes.

* * * *

When he woke up, Finn looked at Brandon from beneath thick lashes. He tried weakly to pull his hand from under Brandon's, but Brandon held on. When Finn spoke, his voice was low and rasping.

"You should have left me there."

Brandon stood up. He leaned down to touch Finn's cheek with gentle fingers, but Finn turned his face away. "Go. Please."

"Finn."

"Please."

Reluctantly, Brandon drew away. He left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

* * * *

He drove back to Clear Water Creek and sat behind his desk brooding, answering questions from Jonah monosyllabically. When he clocked out, he called the hospital from home and was told by a nurse that Finn had requested all visitors be turned away. Especially the sheriff.

Brandon hung up. He despaired of ever getting through to Finn. He sank down on the couch. The piece of paper lying on the coffee table caught his eye. He picked it up and looked at the phone numbers on it. Slowly he dialled.

A gruff voice answered after five rings. "Hello?"

Brandon stayed silent. He had just wanted to hear this man's voice. And this voice told him everything he needed to know.

"Finn? Is that you? It's you, isn't it? Answer me. Baby, where are you? Tell me where you are and I'll come get you right now. This is ridiculous. Finn?"

Long seconds ticked away, and the voice changed.

"You fucking pussy, hiding from me. Do you think I won't find you? You think I'm not going to come knocking on your door and make you regret the day you were fucking *born*, Finn?"

Brandon could stay silent no longer. "This isn't Finn. If I ever meet you, I'll make you pay in blood."

The phone went dead.

Chapter Eight

Rosaline Baxter's sister stood on the porch with arms folded as Brandon got out of his car. "She didn't want to see your deputy; she doesn't want to see you either, Sheriff."

Brandon was surrounded by obstruction on all sides from the very people who needed him. He wanted to bang his head against the nearest wall in frustration. "I only want five minutes of her time. That's all. You tell her that. I'm not moving from here until you do."

Rosaline's sister scowled and went inside, closing the door. It was a couple of minutes before she emerged, glaring. "Five minutes. Do you want some tea?"

"No thanks, ma'am." Brandon took his hat off and stepped into the gloomy interior of the house. Hannah, Rosaline's sister, was widowed; her husband killed in Afghanistan a year previously and the house was a shrine to him, photos on the walls and every surface, his coat still hanging on a hook in the hall. Brandon followed her to a bedroom at the back of the house where Rosaline lay on a single bed, curled up.

"Hello, Rosaline. Thanks for seeing me."

Rosaline sat up, pushing unwashed hair from her bruised eyes. She gestured for Brandon to sit on a chair by the dressing-table and blew her nose on a tissue.

"Rosaline..."

"I don't want to press charges, Sheriff," Rosaline interrupted him. "I told Jonah that."

"I know that, Rosaline. I just thought we could talk a little about your reasons."

Rosaline bit her lip and wrung her hands. "He's my husband of ten years, Sheriff. I don't want to break up my family. You don't put your husband in jail, do you understand that?"

"Yes I do, Rosaline. But when you stood at the altar and took your vows, was there anything in there about allowing your husband to use you as a punching bag?"

Rosaline shot up off the bed, white-faced. "Get out of here right now."

"Rosaline, you love your husband, I get that, but do you love him so much that he can do whatever he wants and you stay with him?"

"Get out."

Her sister opened the door. "Okay, Sheriff, it's time for you to go."

Brandon retreated from the bedroom with a shake of his head. He put his hat on and left the house without bidding Hannah good day. He sat in his car, frustration eating him alive, and tried to make sense of a love that became so warped that one partner would abuse another while the other partner apparently sanctioned it.

He remembered the voice. When had Dominic first exerted his influence over Finn and when had Finn made that conscious decision to stay there and take it?

* * * *

He went over to the Baxter house, found Reuben sitting on his porch drinking a beer, looking like he hadn't a care in the world. He climbed the steps and stood over Reuben wearing his best intimidating scowl.

"Just because you've gotten away with it again, Mr Baxter, doesn't mean I'm not waiting for you to put another foot wrong."

"Oh, I know you are, Sheriff. I guess nothing would give you greater pleasure than locking me up, would it?" Reuben's tone was glib. He actually smirked.

Brandon yanked him out of his chair by the collar of his shirt. He marched him across the porch and threw him against the front window. "You lay one hand on her again and it won't be the courts dealing with you, it'll be me. Personally.

Do you understand?"

"You wouldn't dare." Reuben stared into Brandon's eyes, seeming unsure for the first time.

"Wouldn't I? Try me." Brandon shoved him away, leaving Reuben sprawled across the wooden planks. He got back in his car and drove away, seething.

* * * *

Brandon called the hospital twice a day without fail and was always told the same no matter how he cajoled the nurses. If he visited, he would be turned away. On the third day, he was told Finn had discharged himself against medical advice.

"Jesus Christ, didn't you try to stop him?"

" Sheriff, we're not in the habit of holding patients here against their will."

"But he wasn't in his right mind."

"He was perfectly in his right mind. He was worried about the cost. We gave him oral antibiotics to go home with and his doctor's aware about follow-up."

Brandon hung up. He pushed his chair back and took his car keys and his hat. "I'm going out, Jonah."

Jonah had been eavesdropping not so discreetly on the conversation. He nodded as Brandon strode out.

Once at the house by the lake, Brandon had to go through the rigmarole of identifying himself at the door and waiting for the bolts to slide back and that one blue eye to stare at him around the safety chain.

"Finn," he said wearily. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting tired of you coming around, Sheriff."

"Brandon. My name's Brandon. If I hadn't come around, you'd be lying

dead on your kitchen floor with the flies eating you."

"Suits me just fine."

Brandon sighed. He dropped his head against the door frame, eyes closed.

"Oh Finn, if you would just..."

Finn closed the door.

Brandon sat down on the porch steps. He removed his hat and ran his hand through his hair.

* * * *

Finn had been dozing on the couch. He sat back down and pulled the blanket back over him but he shivered too much to sit still. The hospital had told him his expenses were being covered by the sheriff and Finn had flipped, pulled out his IV and discharged himself. Christ, what was Brandon playing at? Did he want to take control of Finn the way Dominic had controlled him for the past ten years? Was he moving from one bad situation to another? He tried to get a grip on his emotions. The cop might have been meddling and nosy but he had only ever shown concern for Finn, and he was persistent in the face of Finn's rudeness. But Jesus, why? What was there left of him for Brandon to even bother with? He clenched his right fist and felt the scar on his arm contract painfully. Dominic Bateman had guaranteed nobody would ever look at Finn again in his life, so what was Brandon's interest in him? It must have been just pity. Pity for someone who had been treated like an animal and had taken ten years to find the balls to leave.

He got up, blinking tears back furiously, crossed to the window, and twitched back the net curtain. Brandon sat there on his porch, his head resting on his hand. Finn studied him unawares for a moment. The broad shoulders and narrow hips, the muscular biceps, the short dark hair. God, he was stunning. Finn hadn't felt sexual desire in so long that he was almost shocked at the feelings which coursed through his body. He turned his back, breathing unsteadily, and leaned on the back of a chair, fighting it and failing.

He limped out to the front door and slid back the bolts before he drew off

the safety chain with a trembling hand. Then he opened the door and stood back.

Brandon got up quickly off the step. He stepped into the house and closed the door behind him.

Finn shrank back at the purpose on the cop's face, the intent, the blatant desire. His heart hammered furiously, and as Brandon stepped forward, Finn hooked his injured arm around his neck and turned his face up to his.

Brandon kissed him, both hands holding Finn's face, a scorching kiss that took Finn's breath away.

Finn moaned and he wasn't sure if it was with need or fear, because the two warred strongly within him. He stumbled back against the wall, and Brandon went with him, their lips locked. He slid his hands beneath Finn's ass, lifted him off the floor and held him against the wall.

Finn only enjoyed this passion for what it was for a moment. Then he remembered too many encounters with Dominic starting off this way and ending in violence. He tore his mouth away from its divine haven and struggled.

Brandon let him go instantly, stepping back, a hand to his mouth as though it smarted from Finn's kiss. His dark eyes were almost black.

Finn turned his face to the wall. "Go, Brandon. Don't come back here again."

Gentle fingertips touched the back of his neck, sliding over the bare skin between his hair and collar. Finn flinched violently. A mouth breathed against his ear.

"I won't give up on you, Finn."

Footsteps retreated and the door closed. Finn slid down the wall to the ground.

* * * *

Brandon got back in his car with his mouth burning. Christ, he hadn't gone to Finn's intending to do *that*, but that look on Finn's face when he opened the door. Like he *needed* it. Brandon felt bad. He had taken advantage of Finn while his defences were down and scared him badly. It was too soon to let Finn know

how deep his feelings for him ran. First, he had to heal Finn and push his own selfish needs aside.

He turned the car around and when he glanced back, Finn was watching him from behind the living room curtain.

* * * *

Brandon stayed away from the house as he had been told. He made sure to get bulletins from Dr Wright, who paid visits and reported Finn's recovery was progressing well.

On the weekend he went to the main store for groceries and was soon in casual conversation with the owner as she rang up his purchases. Once the weather and the potholes on the main road had been covered, Mrs Barnwell moved on to more interesting topics.

"What do you know about the man who's taken over Eden Gray's old place, Brandon?"

"Nothing much," Brandon said carefully. "Why?"

"There's talk about him in town. How he keeps the place like a fortress and never goes out."

Brandon busied himself putting more goods on the counter.

"Is he on the run or what?"

"No, Mrs Barnwell, he just likes his privacy. Nothing to worry about."

"Hmm, well, he came here yesterday morning asking for a job."

"He did?"

"He did. Kind of bold of him when he gets all his groceries delivered and he owes me two weeks."

Brandon regarded her. "And did you give him a job?"

"No. Ain't got nothing spare, and I wasn't sure I liked the look of him anyway. He seemed like he might fall down any minute."

Brandon swallowed. "He's been sick." He took out his wallet. "How much

does he owe you?"

Mrs Barnwell tried to cover her surprise. "Twenty dollars."

"He only owes you twenty dollars in two weeks?"

"That's right. Perhaps he shops somewhere else."

Brandon put a hundred dollars on the counter. "I want you to put together some essentials. Bread, milk, fruit, vegetables. No junk food. Take it over to him."

For a moment, Mrs Barnwell looked like she was going to cry. "You're a good man, Brandon. Just like Sean."

Brandon started to pack his groceries. "Would you tell me about Sean?"

"What do you want to know?"

"What happened between him and Eden Gray?"

Mr Barnwell sighed. "A terrible tale. Eden and Sean were at school together and when they were seventeen, Sean's friends gang-raped Eden while Sean stood watching. Eden came back to town to hold him to account and Sean's crazy friend tried to kill Eden. Eden shot him and got off with it in court. Then it turned out Sean had had some *thing* for him all that time and next thing, those two ran away together to Canada."

Brandon stared at her. "That's quite a tale." He felt a smile find its way onto his face. If there had been hope for Sean and Eden in their darkest days, then there was hope for him and Finn too.

"Course, not many folks tolerate homosexuality 'round here, but they all felt kind of benevolent towards Sean, even when they found out what he'd done back then, because he was such a good man."

Brandon looked her in the eye. "You know I'm gay don't you, Mrs Barnwell?"

"Priscilla, please. Of course I do, Brandon. People have talked about you from day one. You're way too clean-cut and pretty to be straight." She cackled.

Brandon's cheeks heated a little. "You tell anyone who wants to know that I really don't give a shit what they think about me." He put his money down and

grabbed his grocery bags in each arm. "You be sure and deliver those things to Finn."

* * * *

In his house that evening, Finn sat at the kitchen table staring at the five bags of groceries which had just been delivered by Mrs Barnwell's boy. The boy was a little challenged and told Finn he was doing as he was told when Finn protested that he hadn't ordered them. Finn didn't have a phone to call the store and tell Mrs Barnwell she'd made a mistake. He'd left his cell phone behind in Iowa because he had been too afraid Dominic would use it to trace him and he couldn't afford to have the house phone connected. He sat looking at the groceries. Finally he took out a milk carton, opened it and gulped the liquid down thirstily.

He made some pasta with fresh tomatoes and ate his dinner at the table by candlelight, his first proper meal in weeks. Finn had always been a lousy cook, but had learned to improve with every charred meal thrown at the wall and every time he'd been made to eat his dinner from the kitchen floor.

It dawned on him then that Brandon must have sent the groceries.

He washed the dishes and then took two strong painkillers before bed. He wanted to sleep that night without the feel of Brandon's mouth on his, bringing him back from the dead.

Chapter Nine

Brandon stood at his bedroom window looking out across the lake. It had been a week since he'd last seen Finn, and the kiss still tortured him. It had confirmed to Brandon that his growing feelings for Finn were real. Finn had buried himself deeper into Brandon's psyche than any man had been since Josh. He wanted Finn and all the baggage that came with him. He thought of how he'd held Finn against the wall. How Finn had gasped as Brandon lifted him and he'd felt Finn's hardness against his own. That had told Brandon this was real, that Finn wanted him the same way, but Brandon had to rein in his desire until much later.

Until Finn trusted him.

* * * *

Finn sat looking at his remaining money. Most of what he'd stolen had gone to travelling here and the deposit and first month's rent on this house. Come next month, he wouldn't be able to cover it. He had asked around all over town but there were no jobs going. The café had told him to try again tomorrow when the manager was there, but he didn't hold out much hope. Brandon's groceries would last a good while with Finn's lack of appetite; that wasn't a problem. What was a problem was where Finn was going to live when his landlord threw him out.

He thought of the five-bedroom house with indoor swimming pool he had left. Every time, he had always ended going back there. Perhaps he should accept defeat once more and go back there for good. He was never going to make it on his own. He was worthless, just like Dominic had always said.

* * * *

Brandon had just left the station for a call when he spotted Finn coming out of the café. Finn saw him and immediately changed direction. Brandon followed, calling his name.

"Don't send me any more groceries, Brandon, I'm not a charity case," Finn said coldly over his shoulder without pausing in his step.

"Hey, I just wanted to fatten you up for winter, that's all," Brandon tried to joke.

Finn threw a glare and increased his pace.

Brandon caught Finn's left wrist lightly, caught sight of that damned wedding ring before Finn shrugged away, his face angry.

"Just give me two minutes, Finn. Please."

Finn stared him down stonily.

"Look, I'm sorry for what happened at your house."

Finn looked at the ground.

"It wasn't... I don't want you to think that all I want is—"

"To get into my pants?" Finn asked cynically.

Brandon sighed. "Yeah."

"So you don't want to get into my pants?" Finn looked him steadily in the eye now.

"Stop putting words in my mouth, Finn. What I'm trying to say is that I didn't want you thinking that my concern for you was motivated by..."

"Wanting to get into my pants?"

Brandon smiled. "You've got a smart mouth, Finn. I like it."

For the briefest of moments he thought, to his shock, that Finn was about to smile in return. Then the shutters came down once again, his eyes turned to blue ice and he tried to step past Brandon.

Brandon caught him by the wrist again, no pressure involved, but Finn allowed himself to be stayed like he *wanted* to be stayed. "I haven't finished. You know now that I like you, Finn. I like you a lot. I want to do everything I can to

help you and I want to be your friend and the one you can trust. I want that before anything else. Please believe me."

Finn stared into his eyes. "I don't understand," he said in a whisper.

"What don't you understand?"

"What you see in me that's worth the slightest bit of attention from you."

"Oh, Finn." Brandon reached out and Finn, predictably, flinched away.

"Brandon, I *can't*. Okay? I just can't."

Brandon stood watching as Finn walked away across the town square. For a moment he was sure he'd seen a chink in the walls around Finn until he'd built them up ever higher again.

* * * *

"Dinner at our place on Friday?" Jonah asked over coffee the next morning.

"Sure," Brandon said half-heartedly, lost in thought.

"Laura's going to see what she can do about getting Finn to accept an invite too."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Sure I am. I've been telling her what's going on with him, and she feels real sorry for him..."

"Jonah, if he thinks he's getting an invite to dinner because folks feel sorry for him, you won't see him for dust. He has his pride you know."

"Yeah, I know, but Laura can be kind of persuasive. She's exchanged hellos with him on a couple of occasions, and she's pretty sure she can get round him."

Brandon shook his head, sighing. "He's afraid to leave his house. Do you really think he's going to accept an invite to dinner, least of all if I'm going to be there?"

"I never said your name would be mentioned," Jonah said.

"Christ, don't try and trick him, you'll make him go even further into his shell."

"Listen, trust my wife. She knows how to handle men. Even gay men."

"No one said he was gay," Brandon said defensively, even as he remembered that velvet mouth clinging softly to his.

Jonah snorted. "Come on. He lived with a guy in Iowa. He dresses nice and has great hair. You're *very* interested in him. I put two and two together and came up with four, Brandon. It's not rocket science."

Brandon's face heated.

Jonah smirked. "For the record, you'd make a great couple. Maybe the dinner party will be the night you make it happen."

"Knock it off, Jonah. In case you've forgotten, he's running from an abusive partner. And he wears a wedding ring. Think he's going to let me touch him any time soon? I've more chance of getting *you* into bed."

He scraped his chair back and left a furiously blushing Jonah behind.

* * * *

Laura Mitchell hurried to catch up with Finn when she saw him leaving the doctor's office the next day. "Hi there," she called. "You must be Finn, you've moved into the place by the lake, right?"

Finn stopped, looking suspiciously at her. She had to play this just right. She'd had reports on what a prickly customer he was from Jonah and she knew he had rebuffed Brandon's help numerous times. All she knew was that charity began on her back porch with her. Finn was her neighbour now, and he was in need.

"It's nice to meet you. I usually stop by to visit with new arrivals in town, just to welcome them, bring them a basket, but I understood you were unwell and I didn't want to bother you."

Finn still didn't speak. He merely looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to

sink through the ground.

"I'm Laura Mitchell, Jonah's wife."

Finn looked at her hand. He put his own firmly behind his back.

"I'd love it if you came for dinner on Friday."

Finn looked startled. "I don't..."

"Nothing formal, just some local fish and a nice bottle of wine. Is seven o'clock okay?"

Poor Finn. She felt almost sorry for the way she rode roughshod over his objections. He lowered his head, mumbled something and started to walk away.

"I'll send Jonah over to pick you up at seven," she called after him, not sure if he'd given an assent or not.

She took her cell out and called her husband. "Tell Brandon to make himself presentable. Finn's coming on Friday."

Chapter Ten

Brandon was there at six-thirty, best shirt and pants on, shaved carefully and doused in cologne. His host whistled in approval, much to his embarrassment. "Now I know you can't have made this effort for me," Jonah said, "and I hope you've not gone straight and you're trying to impress my wife, so who can it be for?"

"Shut up." Brandon drank his beer and sat nervously in the corner. How had Laura gotten Finn to agree to this? He wouldn't have if it had been Brandon asking, that was for sure. He was both grateful and sceptical. Finn wouldn't turn up. But then, if Jonah was going over to get him, how could he hide? He guessed Finn could ignore the door, or go out or just flat refuse to come. He sank down a bit on the couch, feeling deflated already. Finn wouldn't come.

* * * *

The knock on the door was hard and firm and scared Finn almost out of his wits even though he'd been expecting it. What was he doing, dressed up with hair carefully slicked back and bottle of wine in hand, pacing the living room like he was a normal person who got invited out to normal things? He'd not been invited out by anyone in ten years, unless one counted Dominic's friends, who passed him around for entertainment.

Finn went to the hall then hesitated. The knock came again.

"Finn, it's Jonah."

Finn pulled the door open, safety chain in place. Jonah's smile only faltered slightly.

"Hey, are you ready?"

"I... don't think I can make it."

"Why not? The wine's open, my wife is slaving over a hot stove. Do you

want to disappoint her?"

"No, but..."

"Then get your coat. It's chilly out tonight."

Finn closed the door. He breathed hard, the wine trembling in his hand. He put the bottle down and reached for the jacket hanging on the end of the banister, pulled it carefully up his right arm and buttoned it up. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror by the door. He had been meaning to take this mirror down since he moved in and decided it must be a priority tomorrow. He hated seeing himself.

He could do this. He could fake social graces for a couple of hours and enjoy some nice food. But God, they knew about him. They knew about Iowa and Dominic, and so Laura Mitchell must have invited him out of pity. He leaned his head against the mirror, fear and anxiety consuming him whole.

"Finn? Are you ready?"

Finn grabbed hold of the wine. He took the safety chain off. He pulled open the door and stepped onto the porch before turning around to lock the door. He tried the handle. Then he unlocked it again and locked it a second time, trying the handle once more. A third time, he unlocked and locked, rattling the handle roughly, pushing at the door.

"It's fine, Finn." Jonah reached towards him.

Finn pulled the key loose, stepped away and almost ran down the porch steps, thrusting the key into his pants' pocket. Jonah followed him, falling into step.

"It's great you've decided to join us."

Finn didn't speak.

"I wanted to apologise. I might have come on strong the other day, when I gave you a ride. I wasn't trying to..." Jonah trailed off and sighed. "I just wanted to say sorry for being an asshole."

Finn was genuinely surprised. "I didn't think that. I just thought you were nosy."

Jonah laughed softly. "I'm a cop, it's my job."

"I know. Just like it's Brandon's job."

"Yeah."

Finn glanced into the dark trees as they walked around the lake. He wished Jonah wasn't off duty and that he carried his gun. This was the first time he'd been out at night since that evening Brandon had found him drunk, pissing on a tree. That night he'd been so bent on self-destruction, he hadn't been afraid of who was waiting in the trees. He'd intended to drown himself in the lake, and Brandon had put a stop to that.

Finn's insides softened when he thought of the sheriff, and he hated himself for it. The kiss still played on his mind. How could he forget it? How could he stop himself wanting more?

"He's a good guy." Jonah's words distracted Finn.

"Who?"

"Brandon."

Finn made no reply.

"He only wants to look out for you."

"And get into my pants." The words slipped out before Finn could stop them.

"Well..." Jonah was embarrassed. "I don't know about that. He doesn't discuss his..."

"You're lying."

Jonah smiled. "I can see why he likes you."

Finn dipped his head, blushing.

* * * *

Jonah opened the door and gestured Finn inside, taking his coat. Finn followed him down the hall and into the living room and realised then that there was another guest when he heard Laura calling to someone from the kitchen. He

rounded the corner and found himself face to face with Brandon.

Of course.

Brandon stood up, looking as nervous as Finn felt. "Hi."

Christ, the man looked just as hot out of uniform as he did in it, which was some feat. Finn nodded by way of reply and looked helplessly towards Jonah who had already moved away into the kitchen.

"You look great," Brandon offered, and Finn studied his shoes, praying for the evening to end before it had even started.

"Finn." Laura bustled through from the kitchen. "So glad you could make it." She planted a kiss on his cheek before he could flinch away. "What are you having to drink?"

"Anything with alcohol." Finn offered the bottle of wine. The other three guests smiled in amusement.

"A man after my own heart," Jonah said. "We've got beer, wine, scotch, vodka, brandy."

"Vodka and coke please."

"Sure. Have a seat."

"Dinner'll be ten minutes." Laura followed her husband back into the kitchen.

Brandon sat back down and Finn took the chair opposite. He folded his hands nervously in his lap. "So you tricked me into coming here then."

"No, I just omitted to tell you I was coming." Brandon's face was conciliatory. "It wasn't my idea. Don't be angry."

"I'm not." Finn was resigned more than anything. Resigned to the almost pleasant sensation of the butterflies in his stomach and the weight of his desire.

"That's good."

Jonah came back with a tall glass, ice cubes clinking against crystal.

"Thanks." Finn tried not to drink it down in one swallow. The vodka was a large measure, and he was grateful.

"Why don't you two move to the table?" Jonah suggested and Finn got up,

followed Brandon's lead to the dining table, and seated himself opposite the sheriff.

Brandon smiled gently, his teeth perfect. Finn's desire took flight, and he almost remembered what it was like to fall in love.

* * * *

Laura served the first course, and Brandon sat there looking at the divine image that was Finn and couldn't believe he had turned up. He wore a blue shirt that only enhanced his stunning eyes, and his dark hair gleamed. For the first time, Brandon wished Finn was a normal man who would fall into bed with him at very little prompting. Then he chastised himself. Finn was normal, he was just damaged and scarred and required tender, loving care. Brandon was either up to the challenge or he wasn't. The way Finn made him feel wasn't any kind of passing crush. He knew this could be real, if only he could dig down into the perfect core of Finn and find what he knew lay there.

Laura and Jonah were wonderful hosts. They stayed away from difficult subjects. They didn't mention Iowa or Finn's reclusiveness. They asked after his health and Jonah said he looked so much better after his stay in hospital. They gossiped light-heartedly about some of the local town characters and almost made Finn smile. Brandon contributed as best he could, but the looks Finn threw him almost made him tremble with need.

Finn only ate a small portion of his first and main courses, but Laura was gracious enough not to comment. He started dessert, working on the sticky toffee pudding and when Brandon noted a smudge of sauce at the corner of his mouth, he longed to lean over the table and wipe it away.

Instead he motioned to Finn and touched his own mouth. Finn's tongue darted out to lick it away and for a moment Brandon imagined that tongue on his own, their mouths joined. That kiss hadn't gone as far as tongues. But even without, it had been made of a passion Brandon only distantly remembered from

his past. It had been made of some deep connection that he wished Finn would see.

He finished his dessert and when Laura and Jonah got up to clear the plates and make coffee, inviting Finn to join them in the kitchen, Brandon left the table to use the bathroom.

* * * *

Finn had drunk so much wine during dinner that he needed the bathroom. He felt pleasantly inebriated as he excused himself and walked through the living room, noticing Brandon wasn't at the table. Too late, he found himself at the foot of the stairs looking up to see Brandon descending them. Finn stepped back against the wall in the cramped hallway.

"I'm glad you came." Brandon moved uncomfortably close to him.

Finn was glad too, but he wouldn't say that. The cop's beautiful brown eyes hypnotised him as Brandon lifted a hand to touch his cheek.

Finn flinched away and only succeeded in knocking his head into the wall.

"Ouch," Brandon said for him and stroked Finn's hair, fingers massaging.

Finn put a hand up against Brandon's chest. He tried to move past the sheriff, but Brandon caught his hand. He brought it to his mouth and pressed a tender kiss to the palm.

Finn trembled, trying half-heartedly to pull his hand back. Brandon pressed Finn's hand back to his chest, held it there, stroking his fingers.

Finn felt Brandon's heart beating under his palm, sure and steady and strong. Brandon's hand left his. His fingers travelled up Finn's right arm, following the track of the bandage beneath his shirt, his touch light. Finn flinched and balked that someone would touch him *there*.

Brandon's hand reached his chest. His fingers slid beneath the top button of his shirt and onto Finn's clavicle to run over the soft dressings across his chest.

Finn tried to speak, tried to tell Brandon to stop, but his throat had closed up. Brandon took his hand away suddenly. His fingers opened Finn's top button swiftly and then his second. Moving Finn right against the wall, he held him by the hips as he leaned down and pressed his lips to the bandage on his chest that covered the burned skin.

Finn gasped in both pain and shock. His fingers curled into Brandon's hair. He closed his eyes as tears spilled down his cheeks.

He shoved Brandon back so hard that the sheriff almost fell at the bottom of the stairs. He charged past him up the stairs and locked himself in the bathroom.

* * * *

Brandon went back into the living room and took his place at the table just as Laura and Jonah brought the coffee out. He had overdone it with Finn again; that was the wine acting not him. He just couldn't keep his hands off the man, try as he might.

"Everything all right?" Jonah asked, looking out expectantly into the hall for signs of Finn coming back.

Brandon nodded.

"He's such a nice guy," Laura said.

* * * *

Finn stood looking at the bandage across his exposed chest in the mirror. Christ, what had Brandon been thinking of to touch and kiss him there? He wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his hand. Brandon's proximity had aroused him. The touch of his hands and his mouth had set him alight.

Dominic's sexual appetite had been legendary. When they had first met, Finn had matched him ably. When the relationship started to hit the rocks, Finn had had trouble expressing any kind of desire when the only sex they indulged in was non-consensual. Dominic had taken Finn along to his doctor, sat there and told the GP he wanted his partner to be treated for erectile dysfunction. The doctor had taken one look at Finn and suggested the cause of this was stress. He

had referred Finn to a counsellor and Dominic had been so annoyed that Finn's problems couldn't be dealt with by a single pill that he had beaten Finn into unconsciousness that night. Finn never saw the counsellor and rarely got an erection again when he was with Dominic.

He'd thought he was impotent until Brandon had kissed him the other night and suddenly Finn's body sat up and took notice and declared itself ready and willing. It had done the same tonight. But his mind had been torn between fear, revulsion at what Brandon was doing, self-pity and all-consuming need. He couldn't help but cry at the tenderness with which Brandon continued to treat him. He couldn't help but imagine Brandon kissing every one of his wounds better, both physical and mental. He was terrified. He had to keep the cop away from him at all costs.

* * * *

It was late when the evening broke up. Brandon offered to walk Finn home, and as much as he could see Finn wanted to refuse, he was clearly too polite to make a scene in front of their hosts.

They stepped outside into heavy rain, Finn hunched inside his jacket. He thanked his hosts for the evening and received a kiss from Laura and a handshake from Jonah with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. As soon as the door closed behind them, Finn set off at a swift pace.

"You don't need to chaperone me. I can find my own way home."

Brandon remembered that voice on the other end of the line threatening Finn's life. "Not a problem," he replied lightly, matching Finn's steps.

Finn huffed. He walked with head down, hands jammed in his pockets.

They reached the lake. Instead of walking around it, the safest option, Finn chose the short cut through the trees. Brandon followed him. The rain soaked his hair and ran down his face. He couldn't let the silence continue, not when he had this opportunity with Finn.

"Are you married, Finn?"

Finn stopped dead. He turned to look at Brandon. "No, I'm not fucking married. I'm queer in case you didn't realise it when you kissed me."

"It's just I saw your ring."

Finn lifted his left hand and looked at it. "I haven't been able to get this ring off for years and believe me I've tried. I've thought of cutting my own fucking finger off before."

Brandon moved closer, intending to soothe Finn's agitation. "There's a jeweller's in town. I can take you there to get it cut off. Failing that, we can go to the hospital."

Finn swallowed. He stared into Brandon's eyes. "I need to tell you for the last time, Brandon. Leave me the fuck alone."

Wordlessly, Brandon shook his head.

Finn flipped. "Jesus Christ, what don't you get? You have no idea what I've been through and you think I'm just ready to fall into bed with you—"

"I don't think that at all, nor do I expect it and if you would just tell me what you've been through then I can help heal you."

Finn's lip trembled, and his face lost its anger. He turned shining eyes up to the night sky and let the rain pelt his face.

"You want to see what he did to me Brandon? Do you want to see?"

Before Brandon could even acquiesce, Finn had ripped his shirt open, pulled it off, and tossed it away. He wrenched at the dressings on his arm and chest. Brandon stepped forward to stop him, but Finn pushed him back. He unravelled the outer bandage and let it fall before he pulled free the second layer and finally the last.

The scar on his inner arm ran from elbow to shoulder and across half his chest below his clavicle. It was ridged and shiny pink, raw in some places, fully formed in others. It was shocking, monstrous and ugly, but Brandon felt no revulsion. He was only looking at another part of Finn, and Finn was beautiful inside and out.

"This is what he did." Finn held his arm up. "His dinner wasn't ready when he came home from work. I was sitting at the kitchen table. He asked me if I wanted a cup of tea and I said no. He was too calm. I knew something was coming. He boiled the kettle and then he picked it up and walked over to me. I saw what he was going to do. I covered my face with my left hand and I reached out with my right to ward him off. He tipped the kettle and poured it down my arm."

Finn sank to his knees, breath hitching in his throat. "I tried to run for the sink, and he blocked my way. I tried to make it upstairs to the shower, and he wouldn't let me past. The pain was so intense that I passed out. When I came to, he had put me in an ice-cold bath. He left me there and went out, and I managed to crawl out onto the floor where I passed out again. When he came back, he picked me up and dressed my arm with some totally inappropriate sticky plasters that stuck and caused me intense agony when he tried to remove them.

"He wouldn't let me get medical treatment until an infection set in. I thought I was going to die. He took me then to the hospital and he told the staff there that I was mentally ill and had done it to myself. I prayed I would die. When he came to fetch me, he told me he had marked me as his for all time and I was so ugly that no one would ever look at me again. I knew he was right, and it was two weeks after that before I even thought of escaping." Finn started to sob, kneeling there on the muddy ground with the rain running down his face. "What sort of man am I that I allowed him to treat me as sub-human for ten years? How can I ever make it back from there?"

Brandon stepped forward. He lifted Finn from the ground and into his arms and carried him, broken and weeping, out of the trees.

Chapter Eleven

Brandon took Finn home. He wrapped him in a towel before he lit the fire and sat him down, shivering, in front of it. He made coffee and tried to put the mug into Finn's hands but Finn flinched violently at the sight of it and refused to take it.

Brandon stood and held his hand out, helping Finn up. He led him upstairs to his bedroom where he reached a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms out and told Finn to undress and get into bed. Brandon went into the bathroom and stripped his wet clothes off, then pulled on a robe. When he went back, Finn was curled on his side beneath the covers.

Brandon leaned over him and pressed a kiss lightly to his temple before he gathered up Finn's wet clothes, switched off the light and went back downstairs. The after hours answering machine at the doctor's office had the cell numbers of both Dr Wright and Naomi Brooks on. He called Naomi.

"Hello, Naomi. It's Brandon."

"Well, hi there." She sounded delighted. Brandon was about to dash her hopes for good.

"I need a favour."

"Go on."

"I need you to redress Finn's arm."

"What? It's not due till—"

"He pulled it off."

"Why did he do that?"

"He was upset. I know it's late, Naomi, but I don't want to leave it uncovered all night. It's going to be too painful for him."

"Where is he?"

"At my place."

Naomi was silent a moment. "I'm on my way." She hung up.

Brandon rested back against the couch and closed his eyes.

* * * *

Naomi was only ten minutes, during which Brandon resisted the urge to go upstairs and check on Finn. He ushered her inside and poured her coffee in the kitchen. Naomi put her bag on the ground and regarded him questioningly, waiting for him to talk.

What was he supposed to say? Clearly she had jumped to half-right conclusions and clearly she was hurt at finding out what he was. She wouldn't be the first or the last woman who had fancied her chances with Brandon, only to find out the truth.

"Finn got a little bit drunk tonight. We went for dinner at Jonah and Laura's and he... got upset while I was walking him home. He tore off his bandage and told me about... *him* and what he did. I had to put him to bed."

Naomi's expression went from suspicion to softness. "Tell me."

"He poured a kettle of boiling water on Finn deliberately because Finn hadn't made his dinner when he came home."

"Jesus Christ." Naomi put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes glistened with tears.

"When he was in the hospital, his doctor X-rayed him all over because she was suspicious about non-accidental injuries. She found a ton of old fractures."

Naomi started to cry. Brandon hurried to get a box of tissues, wishing he hadn't been quite so truthful.

"That bastard, that bastard," Naomi muttered as she blew her nose, before she lifted her tear-streaked face. "Why haven't you ever told me you're gay?"

Brandon was startled at the swift change of subject. His face heated. "I... was looking for the right time."

"Oh really? When would that have been? When I asked you out?"

"No."

"So when? Are you out?"

"Yes."

"Out to everyone but me."

"It's not like that."

"Isn't it? Were you having a laugh at my expense?"

"No. Jesus, Naomi, let's not do this now."

"What about him? Finn."

"What about him?"

Naomi looked at the dressing-gown he wore. "Are you sleeping with him?"

"No."

"Are you in love with him?"

Brandon averted his gaze. "Hold on. I just met the guy. How about you come and look at his arm now and give me a break?"

"I won't give you a break. You made me look like an ass." Naomi stood and lifted her bag.

"I'm sorry."

Naomi regarded him a moment. "Yeah. Me too. Lead the way."

The two of them climbed the stairs and crept into Brandon's bedroom. Brandon reached down to switch on the bedside lamp on the side furthest from Finn, illuminating his pale face in a peachy glow, the bruise on his jaw still a faint shadow.

Naomi placed her bag on the other side of the bed and opened it. "Wake him up then."

She took out a package, which she opened and laid out neatly on the bed before plucking a plastic apron from it and tying it on over her clothes.

Brandon placed his hand on Finn's shoulder. "Finn," he whispered.

Finn rolled onto his back, eyes fluttering open, and blinked at Brandon in confusion.

"Finn, Naomi's here to redress your arm."

Finn slid up abruptly in bed, clutching at the quilt, looking from Brandon to Naomi with suspicion and hostility.

"Relax," Brandon said softly. "Take your t-shirt off."

"Go out of the room," Finn told him.

"What?"

"Go out of the room, I don't want you to see."

"But Finn I saw—"

"I said leave, Brandon, or you can forget it."

Brandon glanced at Naomi who rubbed her hands with alcohol gel and tried to pretend she wasn't listening. Unhappily, he left the room, shutting the door.

* * * *

Finn shrugged his t-shirt off, wincing. He pushed the quilt back and lay down, arm outstretched towards Naomi, watching her.

She opened some dressings onto her sterile field before pulling on gloves. She worked in silence, dressing Finn's wound.

Finn closed his eyes. He didn't know what had got into him tonight. Pulling off his dressings, showing Brandon, crying like a baby. *Alcohol* was what had got into him. Always his downfall. He remembered how many times he had fought back against Dominic while under the influence and how many times it had gotten him twice as hurt. He was ashamed of himself, that Brandon would see him so low, so vulnerable when he had maintained the hard shell for so long now. He bit his quivering lip and turned his face away.

"Are you okay?"

Naomi had never tried to force the story from him, only gently suggested she was always there if Finn needed a shoulder.

Finn nodded. He hoped she thought he almost cried with pain and not the weight of his own desperate feelings. He hoped she didn't despise him for his weakness the way he despised himself.

* * * *

Brandon went into the spare room and sat at his computer desk. Finn was so contrary. First he'd wrenched off the dressings to show Brandon his scar, and then he wouldn't let Brandon see what he had already seen. Madness. But understandable. Finn was ashamed. He was ashamed of that slip of weakness when drunk, what he had done and what he had told Brandon about Dominic.

Dominic fucking Bateman. Brandon clenched his fists. At that moment he almost wished Dominic would come looking for Finn so Brandon could have the pleasure of beating him to a pulp. Nothing would give him more satisfaction.

Naomi came out of the bedroom after ten minutes. Brandon followed her downstairs. "He's okay. Lucky I had some painkillers in my bag, and they should knock him out too. He needs a good rest. He looks like he hasn't slept in days."

"Would you sleep, thinking that monster was going to come after you?"

Naomi looked like she would cry again. She pulled on her coat and headed to the door. "Well, I'm glad he's here with you."

Brandon was too. If it was up to him, he'd keep Finn here permanently. Safe and sound.

"Thanks for coming."

"Don't mention it."

"And I'm sorry for—"

"Hush." Naomi stepped onto the porch and pulled her hood up against the rain. "See you around, Brandon."

"Bye."

Brandon closed the door and locked it. He glanced up the stairs before he went around turning out lights and extinguishing the fire.

He climbed the stairs to bed and brushed his teeth before finding t-shirt and pyjamas and shrugging off his robe to put them on. He hesitated before he pushed open his bedroom door.

He wanted to sleep with Finn. Not because he wanted to try his luck, but because he wanted to hear Finn's soft breathing beside him and know he was safe.

Brandon turned out the hall light. He slid into his room in the dark, found his way to the other side of the bed, and climbed in beside Finn.

Finn lay turned towards him, deeply asleep, not moving as Brandon got himself comfortable. He lay watching Finn for a long time before finally closing his eyes.

Chapter Twelve

When Brandon opened his eyes, Finn lay watching him with an expression of outrage on his face.

"Now don't get excited," Brandon said calmly. "You weren't in a fit state to go home last night. I brought you back here, had your arm dressed. You went to sleep. I was the perfect gentleman." He smiled.

Finn turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "I was a dick last night."

"You weren't."

"Yes, I was. A glass of wine and I start spilling my guts to anyone who'll listen."

"Am I just anyone?"

Finn turned his head so their eyes met. He sighed. "No."

A tight, delicious knot formed in Brandon's chest. His heart beat faster. He felt like a teenager again. Their eyes held for long seconds.

Finn slid away and climbed from the bed. "You need to stay away from me Brandon, before I drag you down." He cast around for his clothes, while Brandon studied his lean shape in the t-shirt and pyjama bottoms he wore. There was a telling bulge in the pants. Finn was half-hard.

Brandon swallowed. "They're downstairs."

Finn moved out of the room without looking at him. Brandon got out of bed and pulled his robe on, adjusting his own erection before he followed Finn down.

Finn was shrugging out of his t-shirt in the living room, and Brandon once more saw the criss-cross pattern of scars across his back. Like he'd been flagellated with something.

"Let me help you."

Finn flinched away. "I can get dressed without help, Brandon. Jesus, stop

treating me like a child."

He pulled on the shirt Brandon had retrieved from the muddy ground the previous night. It was stained, but Finn didn't appear to notice. Brandon went into the kitchen and set some coffee brewing before he pulled out bread for toast.

Finn appeared in the kitchen, fully dressed, jacket on.

"Stay for breakfast," Brandon said.

Finn hovered. "I should get back."

"Why? What's the big rush to get home to your empty house? So you can sit there like you do every day and wait for him to come get you?"

Brandon hadn't meant to sound so cruel. He saw the instant fury on Finn's face.

"You son of a bitch."

Finn marched across the kitchen, fist raised and Brandon—although he could have taken Finn with ease, grabbed his arm, twisted it until he dislocated the shoulder—had no intention of hurting him. He merely turned his face away and waited for the blow to come. If it made Finn feel better, so be it.

But Finn lowered his fist. Instead, with a noise of frustration, he gripped Brandon by the front of his robe and shook him. "I hate you, I hate you."

"No you don't." Brandon took Finn's head in one hand and guided it to his shoulder.

Finn struggled with him, pushing and pulling until he found his way into Brandon's arms and Brandon had tight hold of him.

Finn slumped against Brandon's body. Great gulps for air came from his throat before he wept with wrenching sobs that shook his entire body.

Brandon held him closer, stroking Finn's silky hair. "I meant it when I said I wouldn't give up on you, Finn. No matter what."

Finn's arms tightened around his back. He clung on like a drowning man, his sobs slowing into exhaustion.

Brandon's lips found his temple. He kissed Finn's eyebrow and the swollen skin of his eyelid. Finn lifted his head, his face tear-streaked.

Brandon reached for a tissue from the box on the counter. He wiped Finn's cheeks and eyes and his runny nose.

Finn kept his eyes locked on his. The electricity crackled between them. There was no mistaking it for anything else.

Brandon took Finn's face in his hands and lifted it, studying the dark blue irises for a moment before he bent his head and pressed his lips to Finn's.

Finn's mouth parted under his in invitation. He pressed forward, deepening the kiss, pushing Brandon up against the kitchen counter so Brandon thought all his dreams had come true.

Their tongues touched. Brandon pushed a thigh between Finn's legs, felt the erection there and ground deliberately against it.

Finn sucked in his breath and let out a moan. He pulled Brandon's robe open and with both hands, pushed up his t-shirt, spread his fingers over Brandon's chest and stroked his nipples.

Brandon shivered and trembled. He put his hands over Finn's, moving them, guiding one down his abdomen to the hardness between his legs.

Finn's mouth broke from Brandon's. He cursed under his breath, the black of his pupil almost overwhelming the dark blue iris as he touched Brandon.

Brandon stifled a groan. Christ, he was going to explode here just from the long, slim fingers touching him through his flimsy pants. He needed more; he was desperate for more, but he doubted Finn wanted to go all the way, no matter how malleable he seemed at the moment.

He marched Finn backwards, took him by the hips and lifted him up onto the kitchen table. Finn stared at him wide-eyed, lifting his backside willingly while Brandon unfastened and pulled his pants down, followed by his boxers and pushed his legs firmly apart.

Finn was gloriously endowed and hard as a rock. Brandon stooped down, grabbed the base of Finn's cock and sucked him down.

"Fuck." Finn grabbed him by the hair, squirming.

Brandon slid his mouth wetly up and down Finn's shaft, drawing back to

flick his tongue over the rosy head of his cock. His other hand weighed Finn's tight sac in its palm, squeezing his balls gently.

Finn supported himself on the table with arms behind him, head lolling back, pelvis bucking up with every wet slide down his cock.

He was noisy in his pleasure, breathing heavily, gasps interspersed with moans which made Brandon ever harder. He couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed giving a blowjob so much. Finn's hard flesh in his mouth made his own cock twitch. He put a hand down to touch himself, rubbing through his pants.

"Brandon..." Finn groaned. "Brandon." His hand gripped Brandon's shoulder, then the back of his neck, but his touch was delicate. He didn't try to force Brandon's head down.

But Brandon took as much as he could anyway, his rhythm swift, Finn's cock glistening with saliva. As he dragged his tongue teasingly down the sides of Finn's cock, he glanced up.

Finn watched him beneath thick lashes, his kiss-swollen mouth parted. Brandon surged upright and caught Finn's lips.

Finn gasped and kissed him back, bucking into Brandon's hand as he jerked him off rapidly, wrapping his legs around Brandon.

Finn's body stiffened. He arched against Brandon, crying out, teeth catching Brandon's lip.

Brandon continued to kiss him, smothering the noise as Finn came, spurting over Brandon's hand in a torrent.

Finn's head fell back. He continued to tremble uncontrollably, moaning and cursing. Brandon kissed him on the throat and waited until Finn was still before he let him go and moved away.

Brandon touched his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingers before he went to the sink and washed the semen off his hand. Behind him, he heard Finn slide off the table, dressing himself. Brandon turned around, drying his hands.

Finn looked awkward. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes gleaming. Post-orgasm, he was even more stunning than usual. "I hurt you," he murmured, gesturing to Brandon's mouth.

"It's nothing." Brandon dabbed at it with some paper towel.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so carried away."

"I said it's okay, forget it."

Finn hesitated. "I should go." He turned and walked quickly out of the kitchen.

Brandon fastened his robe up. He found Finn pulling his shoes on at the front door. Brandon reached past him to unlock the door.

Finn opened it quickly and stepped outside. It seemed he couldn't get away fast enough. He stood there a moment, shuffling his feet. "Thanks. For last night." He turned and walked away at a swift pace.

Brandon stared after him. Sighing, he closed the door. Finn's presence seemed to linger everywhere in his house as he went upstairs, switched on the shower and discarded his clothes.

He climbed beneath the hot spray and there, jerked off slowly and leisurely as he remembered Finn in his mouth.

Chapter Thirteen

Finn got into the shower at home. Christ, not only had he achieved an erection, but he'd actually got off. He could still feel Brandon's mouth around him now. That man knew a thing or two about giving a blow job, that was for sure. It made Finn hard again just to think about it.

He would have liked to return the favour, but once he'd shot his load, he'd felt more clear-headed and regretful. He was afraid to tangle any more intimately with Brandon. Afraid of what the cop had done to him, how he'd broken Finn's defences down yet again that morning and driven him to an ecstasy he'd not known in years.

He trembled beneath the water. How was he going to stop himself next time their paths crossed?

* * * *

Brandon got dressed and walked to the store for some supplies after breakfast. It was hot out after last night's rainfall. He had a rare Saturday off but almost wished he was working so he didn't have time to brood all day over Finn.

Priscilla Barnwell greeted him. "I sent those supplies over to Finn like you asked. He tried to protest but my boy just left them."

"He doesn't like charity." Brandon took some milk from the fridge and placed it on the counter before he looked at the fresh bread.

"He doesn't like asking for help is what it is, but when it's someone like you offering, he's crazy to turn it down."

Brandon blushed at the compliment. He remembered what he'd offered that Finn hadn't turned down that morning and reddened further, keeping his face turned away.

He took a basket, placed some bread in it and set off to the back of the

store for eggs, where Priscilla couldn't carry on the conversation.

* * * *

Once he'd escaped with his groceries, to his astonishment he almost ran into Finn, who loitered outside the store.

"Hey."

"Hey, Brandon. I wanted to..." Finn shuffled on the spot nervously.

Brandon put a hand on his shoulder to guide him away from the door and into the shadows of a cypress tree. For the first time, he noticed Finn didn't flinch when he was touched. Brandon held his grocery bag with one arm and waited for Finn to speak.

"I kind of wanted to say sorry for this morning."

"Which bit in particular?"

Finn reddened. "For... being so selfish."

Taken aback, Brandon said, "Hey, you don't owe me an apology. I didn't do that to get something in return. Sometimes giving is just as nice as receiving." He coughed. "So to speak."

Finn went even more crimson. "Yeah, well... I shouldn't have let you."

"Why not?"

"I... don't want to lead you on. I know you have these ideas and..."

Brandon moved closer and looked down into those sapphire eyes. "Finn, I *do* have ideas and I already told you, I'm not in a rush for anything. Perhaps this morning was too fast, but I couldn't help wanting to do that to you. I won't touch you again if you'll just... say you're my friend."

"Oh, Brandon." Finn sighed. "I can't afford the luxury of having friends. I might have to move on soon."

A leaden weight wedged itself in Brandon's throat. "Why?"

"I can't stay in one place for too long. He... might find me."

Brandon's hand found Finn's, fingers closing around it. "Hey, what is it

you don't get about having me on your side? Do you really think I'm going to let anything happen to you? Let him come. I'm ready for him."

Finn squeezed his hand. His eyes brimmed with tears.

The tender moment was ruined by a shrill ringing from Brandon's pocket. He cursed and let Finn go, pulling out his cell.

Jonah calling.

"Brandon, I'm sorry, I know it's your day off."

Brandon sighed inwardly. He had been about to make a tentative suggestion of Finn accompanying him for a nice walk. "Don't apologise, Jonah, I'm on call after all."

"Yeah well, you're going to wish you weren't."

Brandon was instantly alert. "What's happened?"

Jonah sighed. "I'm over at the Baxter place."

Brandon turned cold all over. He just knew something terrible was coming.

"He's murdered her."

Brandon staggered back, dropping his groceries. He turned away from Finn, hand over his eyes.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way." Brandon put his cell back in his pocket.

He stood a moment with one hand braced against the store window, trying to compose himself. A hand touched his back, stroking soothingly.

"What's happened?"

Brandon swallowed, not trusting his voice. "Reuben Baxter's murdered his wife."

"Oh Jesus."

Brandon turned around and for the first time, Finn provided the comfort. He took Brandon in his arms and held him close.

* * * *

The Baxter place was a hive of activity. Crime scene investigators from the city were all over it in white suits. A mortuary van stood outside, a body being loaded into it. In the back of Jonah's car, Reuben Baxter sat handcuffed.

Brandon glanced down at him through the window and was met with blank, staring eyes.

He went inside. The place looked like it had been ransacked, glass and broken ornaments everywhere, overturned chairs and shattered TV. The floor swam in blood, the walls splattered with it. A chalk outline marked the body's position.

Brandon hung back, taking it all in. He couldn't believe it. Jonah came up to him. He ushered Brandon back outside.

Brandon sat down on the porch steps. "This is all my fault."

"Don't even go there," Jonah warned, hand on his shoulder. "You tried your best with her."

Brandon shook his head. "I should have moved her to a safe house. I thought... I didn't think he'd dare. I put the fear of God into him."

"I know. It was always going to happen, Brandon, you couldn't have prevented it."

Brandon looked over to the squad car. "Want me to take him back?"

"No, I'll deal with him. Go on home and I'll finish up here. I'll see you on Monday."

Brandon climbed wearily to his feet.

"How's Finn?"

"He's okay. I got the full story out of him last night. About how that bastard deliberately poured hot water over him."

"Jesus Christ."

"He got himself in a state. I took him to stay at my place." He was grateful Jonah made no comment on this.

"It was real great he came over, Brandon. I was proud of him. Must have

taken a lot of guts."

"Yeah. You sure I can't...?"

"No. Get gone."

Brandon walked down the steps. Instead of turning right to walk back around the lake to his own house, he turned left, towards the only other house on this road.

* * * *

Finn peered at him from behind the safety chain. "Are you okay?"

"No. Can I come in?"

Finn closed the door. Brandon heard the rattle of bolts and the chain being drawn back before the door opened again. Finn stood back to allow him entry.

Brandon stepped inside and into Finn's arMs

Chapter Fourteen

Brandon sat drinking orange juice in Finn's bare living room with Finn in the chair opposite, holding his own glass, eyes on Brandon. In the long, drawn-out silence, each studied the other.

"That could have been you today," Brandon said finally.

Finn blanched like Brandon had slapped him. "Don't."

"I can't help it. That's all I thought when I saw the blood up the walls."

"I said don't!" Finn got up, slammed his glass onto the coffee table and headed for the kitchen.

Brandon followed him. "Stay with me."

Finn whirled around. "What did you say?"

"I said stay with me. I'll protect you."

Finn was ghostly white now with two angry spots of colour on his cheeks. "I need protecting do I, like some trembling woman? Who do you think you are, Dirty fucking Harry?" He shoved Brandon back. "Get the hell out of my house. I don't need you or anybody else, you interfering prick!"

Brandon held his hands up, walking backwards as Finn advanced on him. He couldn't believe his reaction. He'd only wanted Finn safe. He'd only wanted not to see Finn in a body bag going to the mortuary.

He turned away, walked down the hall to the front door and opened it.

"Don't come back, Brandon," Finn snapped behind him. "I don't need you."

Brandon turned around as the door slammed resoundingly in his face and the bolts slid home.

Great, just great.

* * * *

Brandon didn't much care that it was barely afternoon. He went to Bluey's bar and told the bartender to line them up and not stop until Brandon indicated so. It was hardly appropriate behaviour for their sheriff, but then it wasn't every day that the woman he had failed to protect got murdered and the man he was desperate to protect, first let Brandon blow him, then told him to get lost for good. As far as he was concerned he was allowed to feel a little sorry for himself.

He finished the first beer. He had to put Finn aside for good. His best shot had failed. He could do no more than that. Whatever he had once imagined and hoped for between them was no longer realistic. It never had been. Finn was too badly damaged to ever find his way back now. Brandon understood that finally.

A man approached the bar and slid onto a stool two down from Brandon. Tall, at least six feet four, and built like a brick shithouse, he wore a plaid shirt and tight jeans that strained against muscular thighs as he sat down, legs spread.

He caught Brandon looking. He threw him a searching look of his own, lingering on Brandon's torso, delving into his groin and then coming back up to fix on his eyes. The stranger had piercingly blue eyes, almost electric, unsettling. He grinned crookedly and gave Brandon a blatant wink.

Brandon stared. He flushed and turned his attention back to his beer. Christ, who was this guy? He had thought himself the only queer in town until Finn came along. He had never come down to this bar yet and got a thorough once-over from some guy virtually offering it on a plate.

Brandon took his second beer. The guy wasn't his type anyway. Brandon didn't really do blonds and something about the guy with his powerful physique and hard jaw turned him off. The stranger seemed a little dangerous. Brandon didn't go for men bigger than him and he didn't go for men clearly out to dominate. Brandon was easygoing in bed, but he was no one's toy.

The guy continued to check him out. Brandon threw a hard glare his way, making it clear he wasn't interested. Finally, the stranger slid off his stool and walked across the bar, down the steps to the games area, zeroing in on new prey.

Of course.

There was somebody else like him in town that Brandon had forgotten about. Jordan, Fred Davies' twenty-two year old son. He and his dad had helped Brandon with some work on the house when he had first moved in. The lad, all badly-dyed black emo hair, lip-ring and skinny jeans, hadn't exactly hid his adoration of Brandon, but Fred had seemed oblivious. Brandon wouldn't have gone there for any money. Not only didn't he shit on his own doorstep, but he didn't do guys thirteen years younger and clearly inexperienced either.

The stranger in town clearly did. He approached Jordan and his little emo friend, muscling in on their pool game, all smiles and knowing body language and Brandon watched, a little disgusted. The new guy soon came back to the bar and ordered three beers, throwing Brandon a triumphant little look like the cat that got the cream.

Brandon took his third beer and told himself he wouldn't watch any further.

* * * *

Five beers in and everything was all right with the world. Brandon looked at the bottles on the top shelf, debating whether to move onto hard liquor, while down in the games area, the stranger monopolised Jordan and his friend, plying them with drink and rubbing body parts against theirs in the guise of helping them cue up shots.

Jordan's friend was Simon, a shy lad who went to the same college and was rarely seen without Jordan. Brandon didn't know if they were an item and didn't really care, but the stranger clearly did. He seemed to share his attention equally between Jordan and Simon. What was going on here?

Brandon felt like stepping in. He felt like showing his badge—except his badge was at home—and having a quiet word in Brick Shithouse's ear. Something along the lines of, "I'm sheriff here and I know Jordan's father. How

about you go on home and download some twink porn in the comfort of your own home instead of trying to create your own here under my nose?"

He sighed and ordered a shot of Southern Comfort. When he glanced around, Jordan and Simon were pulling on their coats and Brick Shithouse was ushering them outside with fatherly concern. He grinned at Brandon as he passed and winked once more.

Brandon took some deep breaths. He finished his drink, paid his tab and left.

The dusty yard outside Bluey's was deserted and the road quiet, and Brandon frowned. Then a sound hit his ears and quietly, he turned around the corner of the building to glance into the back alley.

The stranger had Jordan and Simon in a three way kiss, a possessive hand on each backside. The two boys moaned as though this were the most exciting thing to ever happen to them. Brandon could kind of see where they were coming from. He'd been seduced by a handsome older man at nineteen. Seduced and dominated and given pleasure beyond his wildest dreams. It was a fond memory, but it had no bearing on the man he was now.

The stranger unfastened himself and drew an impressive erection free. He shoved both boys to their knees and Jordan and Simon went about their task with gusto, Jordan sucking while Simon played with the man's balls. They swapped roles, they kissed each other over the man's cock and slowly, but reluctantly, Brandon the voyeur became aroused.

He ducked back around the corner and leaned against the wall, eyes closed, striving for control. This wasn't the way to get Finn out of his system, spying on some muscle-bound asshole and his two twinks and getting his kicks. But Brandon tended to make poor choices when he was drunk, and this afternoon was no different. The way he felt, he was tempted to wade into that alley and ask if there was room for one more.

He peeked back around the corner.

Simon was face first over a beer barrel, jeans around his ankles. While the

stranger thrust into him, Simon cried out, and his mouth was smothered by a rough hand. "Take it like a man, not a boy," he was told.

Jordan hovered by the sides of both men, looking at his friend with clear concern. As Simon was pounded into the barrel and winced and cried with every movement, Jordan told the stranger, "You're hurting him. I think you should stop."

"Shut up kid and lube yourself up, you're next." He took his hand away from Simon's mouth and Simon let forth a wail.

"You need to... you need to... stop... I don't want..." He started to struggle violently and his partner gripped him by the neck, held him still as though he restrained a dog.

"Let him go!" Jordan pounded at the man's shoulder and was shoved away.

Brandon stepped around the corner and into the alleyway. "Let him go." His voice carried clean and loud through the noise the three men made.

The stranger stopped but stayed embedded in his partner. He smirked slowly. "Well, well, well, if it isn't my admirer. Come to join in?"

"I'm no admirer of yours. Not now I've seen your technique. I'm sheriff here is who I am. Let him go."

The man frowned and then laughed. He drew out of his partner, and Simon peeled himself off the barrel and slunk away, pulling his jeans up and crying, Jordan glancing at Brandon as the two left the alley.

The stranger fastened himself away. The bulge tented his jeans. "Hey, I'm a cop too, give a guy a break, can you blame me for having some fun? Those two little sluts practically begged me for it."

Brandon's lip curled in disgust. He couldn't believe a fellow cop would behave this way. "Yeah, they sure looked like they were begging for it to me."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Kids aren't really my thing anyway. I was looking to get myself a real man today, and you fit the bill nicely." He leered at Brandon, stepping closer.

"Not even if you were the last man on earth. I'm giving you a warning, and

I don't give a fuck if you're a cop. Whatever the hell you're doing here, you keep it clean because I'll be watching you from now on. You got it?"

A spark of fury lit the electric blue eyes. The man smiled maliciously.

"You got it, boss. Looking forward to you watching me. I'll make sure and put on a good show." He winked, stepped past Brandon and left the alley.

Brandon watched him go and had a feeling their paths would cross again.

Chapter Fifteen

Brandon was in to work early next morning, placing two cooked breakfasts on his and Jonah's desks as he took his jacket off.

"Brandon, it's your weekend off." Jonah looked exasperated.

"Didn't much feel like staying at home. Thought you might need some help with paperwork." Brandon glanced towards the cells. "Where is he?"

"Gone to County jail for his arraignment first thing tomorrow."

Brandon sat down at his desk and eyed the package from the café. "Good. I might not have been able to control myself if the son of a bitch was here."

"Autopsy was done last night. Preliminary report showed sixteen stab wounds with the fatal one piercing the aorta."

"Jesus Christ. Wish I'd stayed at home. Thanks, Jonah."

"You're welcome. Funeral's set for Tuesday."

Brandon nodded tightly. He had plenty of black suits. One thing you could always rely on as a cop was having plenty to wear to a funeral. His thoughts drifted back to Finn, as they had all night. Finn lounging on his kitchen table with knees apart, having the time of his life. Then Finn slamming the door in his face and saying he didn't need Brandon.

"How's Finn?"

Brandon ran a hand through his hair, pulled his breakfast to him and unwrapped the polystyrene container. "Finn is... history. He told me I thought I was Dirty Harry trying to protect him and he shoved me out of his house. I'm done trying with him."

"You shouldn't."

"What?"

"You shouldn't give up. Just give him time."

Brandon pushed his breakfast away and stood, putting his hat on. "Think I'll take a drive, see if I can't arrest anyone." He smiled without mirth and took

his keys, leaving the station.

* * * *

He walked around the town square, nodding at a few people he knew, before someone coming out of the store caught his eye. Jordan Davies. Jordan flushed when he saw Brandon, hesitated as though torn between fleeing and staying and then finally waited for Brandon to approach him, nervously shuffling his feet.

"Hey, Sheriff."

"Hi, Jordan. How's your head this morning?"

"Not so good." Jordan carried a bag which he tipped so Brandon saw it was laden with junk food. He smiled ruefully. "I just wanted to say... you know, thanks for last night."

"Not a problem."

"I don't want you to think that..."

"What?"

"That I always act like that. That I let random guys pick me up in bars and..." Jordan trailed off, reddening further.

"That's none of my business. You should just be more careful who you choose, that's all."

"I know."

"Drink can cause us to make poor choices, Jordan. You can have a good time without it." Brandon almost laughed at himself as he remembered his own attempts to get plastered yesterday.

"I know but... it gives me confidence. You don't know how hard it is, Sheriff, living in a small town like this and being... different. Having to keep it from my dad because he'll fucking kill me."

"Who says he'll kill you?"

"I just know he will."

Brandon regarded him a moment. "I do know what it's like to be different, Jordan, I've always known."

Jordan bit his lip. "Are you... out?"

"Sure."

Jordan sighed. "Lucky bastard."

"Am I?"

"Yeah."

"All I can say is it gets easier as you get older."

"What does?"

"Dealing with people and their prejudices. Learning not to give a fuck."

Jordan smiled shyly. The admiration shone from his dark eyes. "That guy last night, did he try to pick you up before he tried his luck with me and Simon?"

"Yeah," Brandon admitted reluctantly.

"You knew better than us didn't you?"

Brandon shrugged. "He wasn't my type."

"And what is?" Jordan stood looking up at him through his black fringe hopefully.

Brandon sighed inwardly. He really didn't want to dent the kid's self-confidence anymore. "Your guess is as good as mine. Just not assholes like that guy you took into the alley last night."

Jordan looked at his feet.

"What about your friend Simon? You seem close."

Jordan's head jerked up. "Oh no, we're... he kind of likes me but... I don't know."

"What's the problem? You make a nice pair from what I can see."

Jordan stared. "You t-think?" he stammered.

"Yes, I do." Jordan and Simon were like two little emo peas in a pod. No wonder Mr Brick Shithouse had fancied his chances with both.

"Well I..." Jordan trailed off hopelessly. Abruptly he changed direction. "Would you speak to my dad for me? Tell him I'm queer?"

Brandon stared. "Jordan, that's not really in my job description."

"I'm not asking you to do it as a cop. I'm asking you to do it as another gay guy. A gay guy who's important around here. Someone people look up to."

Brandon's heart softened towards him. What a sweet kid he was. To think he had been tangling with that monster in the alleyway. "I don't know how I'd do that, Jordan. I think this is something that should come from you. And besides, don't you think your dad suspects already?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Take your time to think about how you're going to do it. There's no rush."

"How did *your* dad react?"

Like the world had ended. "He found it... challenging."

Jordan sighed. "Quit the euphemisms, Sheriff. He hated your fucking queer guts, right?"

Brandon smiled. "He got over it."

"He did?"

"Sure."

"Have you... taken guys home to meet him?"

"Yes." Just the one. Josh. Both his parents had been fond of him.

"I'd love to take someone home to meet him. I'd love to have a boyfriend stay over in my room."

"One step at a time. Gain his acceptance first."

"I want to tell him today. Would you come over? I'll tell him but you could just... be there. So he doesn't kill me."

"Jordan, he's not going to kill you."

"Please?"

"What time?"

"Come over at three. He'll be home from work."

"All right. I'll see you then."

"Thanks." Jordan grinned with relief and walked away.

Brandon stood looking after him. What was he doing? How had he

somehow agreed to be present at the most private, difficult time a man could ever face? Shit.

* * * *

Brandon left the station again later, telling Jonah he was going home. He didn't feel the need to share where he was going or what crazy request he had agreed to. He thought of Finn as he drove to the Davies' house. Could he drive over there on the way home, try and smooth Finn's raised hackles? But hadn't he decided yesterday while downing his beers to leave Finn alone? To leave him to drown in whatever self-pity consumed him and caused him to push Brandon constantly away, even though Brandon felt the heat between them at every encounter?

He drew up outside the white, clapboard house and got out of the car. No, he wouldn't go over to Finn's. If Finn wanted him, he knew where Brandon was.

He knocked on the door, and it was answered after a few moments by Fred Davies.

"Hey, Sheriff." He shook Brandon's hand. "What can I do for you?"

"Jordan asked me to stop by."

Fred frowned. "He did? Whatever he says I've done, it's not true." He grinned. "Come on in. Get you a beer?"

"Not for me thanks, Fred." Brandon followed him into the living room and took the offered seat. Jordan lingered by the window, pale and anxious-looking.

Fred glanced at his son and then at Brandon. He folded his arms "What's going on here?"

Fred seemed like a good guy. Friendly and easygoing, he had been most obliging helping Brandon out with his house and no one in town had a bad thing to say about him. People tended to change where sexuality was involved, though. Brandon knew from experience. The nicest guy in the world changed into a bigoted monster when he realised his son liked to sleep with other men.

Brandon looked at Jordan. "Jordan asked my advice this morning on a little matter he wanted to discuss with you. He was feeling apprehensive and so asked me to be present for moral support."

Fred looked unhappy. "If he needs the sheriff present to say what he's got to say to me, then it doesn't look good. Are you in trouble, son?"

"No, Dad," Jordan said.

"Then you better come out with it."

Jordan hesitated. He looked at Brandon, shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and twisted the material, bouncing from one foot to another.

Brandon wished he was home in front of the TV rather than witnessing this private family moment, the greatest test father and son would ever face.

"I like other boys, Dad."

Fred flushed deeply. "What?"

"I'm gay."

"Jesus fucking Christ, son." Fred shot an apologetic look at Brandon. "Are you fucking serious?"

Jordan nodded. Tears stood starkly in his dark eyes.

"Oh my God, what would your poor mother say? You need to give me five." He turned and walked out of the room.

Jordan started to cry. Brandon stood up, sighing inwardly. Did these things ever go well? Did any father ever embrace his son and cry, "Great, son! Well guess what, I'm a drag queen; now I'll have someone to come to the gay bars with me."?

Brandon handed Jordan his handkerchief. He followed Fred into the kitchen.

Fred was crying by the sink. "Did you put him up to this, Sheriff?"

"What? No."

"You're gay, aren't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"I heard you and Finn Austen had a thing."

"You heard wrong."

"Jesus Christ, my only fucking child, my wife gone and he tells me he's never going to give me any grandchildren. I'm never going to see him married."

Brandon bit his lip because both things were possible, but traditional folks didn't see it that way. "He was frightened to tell you, Fred, but he was brave to do it. I hope you're going to give him some support."

Fred shot a look at him. "Who's going to support *me*?"

"I can give you the numbers of support groups for parents of..."

"Jesus Christ, I always knew he was different but..." Fred groaned and grabbed at his thinning hair. "Why did he have to tell me? Why couldn't he have kept it hidden?"

"You'd preferred him to have gone through life lying to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Don't you want him to be happy?"

"Of course I do."

"Then don't shut him out when he needs you most."

Fred stood there a moment in silence. He rubbed his hand over his face before he walked back into the living room. Brandon watched from the kitchen as Fred embraced his son and Jordan held onto him hard, crying.

Brandon let himself quietly out of the back door and went to his car.

* * * *

Finn looked up from his sandwich at a knock on the door. He sighed, pushing his chair back from the kitchen table. Christ, Brandon just didn't give up. But did Finn really want him to give up? Hadn't he lain awake all night tortured by how he had thrown Brandon out of the house, by the idea that he had driven Brandon away for good? Hadn't he gone over and over in his mind a thousand times those few minutes on the kitchen table with Brandon bending between his spread legs? God, could he really turn down more of the same?

He walked down the hall, about to call out to Brandon when the knock came again and a voice spoke on the other side of the door.

"Finn, are you in there?"

Finn froze on the spot, so terrified he thought he would wet his pants.

* * * *

Brandon drove home more than a little satisfied at the outcome of the Davies' debate and reasonably confident that he wouldn't be called out to an assault later that day or that Jordan wouldn't knock on his door and tell Brandon he had been thrown out of the house.

He got out of his car outside his house and climbed the porch steps. As he reached for the handle of his door, he glanced across the lake by instinct to Finn's house.

A big man stood on the porch, silhouetted against the lengthening afternoon shadows, meaty fist raised to knock on the door.

Brandon's stomach turned over so violently he felt nauseous. He scrambled back into his car and took off, tyres squealing down the lane.

Chapter Sixteen

Brandon skidded to a halt, spraying gravel, and lurched from his car. The man had barely turned around to see what all the commotion was about before Brandon dragged him from the porch and threw him onto the dirt road, one knee against his chest, nightstick hard against his throat. It was all he could do not to draw his gun.

"You step inside that house just fucking once and I'll lock you up and throw away the key, got it?"

Electric blue eyes stared up at him. "Well, hello again, Sheriff. Nice to see Finn's rolled out the welcoming committee."

"I know who you are." Brandon couldn't quite believe he hadn't realised who the monster in the alleyway was the previous night and hadn't recognised that voice that had issued those threats down the phone line from Iowa.

"You do? My reputation precedes me."

Brandon climbed to his feet and watched as Dominic Bateman got to his.

"That's police brutality, Sheriff. I come here minding my own business, looking for my life partner—"

"Your *what*?" Brandon glanced towards the door and saw it was open, safety chain in place, one moist blue eye looking around it.

"Finn, my partner of ten years." Dominic folded his arms across his huge chest, jaw set solid.

"Ah, you mean your punching bag. The guy you've tortured, abused and terrorised for ten years."

Dominic's face darkened. "That's quite a fantastical accusation, Sheriff. Got some evidence to back that up?"

"Sure. X-rays of every broken bone you ever inflicted on him. The scar you left him when you poured boiling water on him because your dinner wasn't ready."

Dominic smiled. He stepped closer to Brandon, taller by some four inches. His voice was quietly persuasive. "Sheriff, I guess you haven't known Finn long enough to realise yet that he's a compulsive liar and self-harmer. He's been in and out of mental institutions all his life. I'm the only one brave enough to take him on."

Brandon turned his head slowly to glance up to the house. What he could see of Finn's face was perfectly ashen. The door slammed shut.

"You see? He's ashamed when people find out the truth. Ashamed of how he goes around blackening my good name. It's a relief that people don't tend to believe him back home. They just feel sorry for him. Poor little bastard."

Brandon stared.

"So I'll take him back with me now, save you any more trouble. I appreciate you looking out for him, Sheriff."

Brandon folded his nightstick with a loud click and put it back in its holster. Deliberately, he fingered the clip holding his gun in place. "You come within five hundred yards of this house again, you'll find yourself arrested, Mr Bateman."

Flat blue eyes stared back at him. "In case you haven't realised yet, we're in a different state here. You can't charge me with anything, least of all the fantasies of some sick individual hiding out here like the pussy he is." Dominic raised his voice to a shout. "Be seeing you, Finn."

He started to walk off down the road, looking back hard at Brandon.

Brandon stared him out until Dominic turned around the curve of the lake and was lost from view. He ran a hand through his hair and let out his breath. His heart was hammering so hard with fury he trembled all over.

He slowly climbed the porch steps to the door and listened carefully to the silence behind it.

"Finn?"

The living room curtain twitched back. Finn stood looking at him.

Brandon stepped to the window. He laid the palm of his hand against the

glass. "Finn. I'm here. I promise you."

Finn let the curtain go and disappeared.

* * * *

Brandon didn't sleep a wink that night. Once an hour he was up at the window, looking across the lake, watching the door, the windows, the light in the bedroom. Christ, Dominic could have broken in and killed Finn by now. Who said he hadn't?

Finally at five o'clock, as the dawn was starting to break, he left his house and walked around the lake, watching the road and every little movement in the trees.

All the curtains were drawn at Finn's and there was no sound. Brandon walked around the back of the house. The gate was padlocked and the barbed wire intact, still proudly flying the little piece of cloth that had ripped from Brandon's regulation pants. He looked through a gap in the fence. All the back windows were intact, the back door closed.

Brandon came away. He trod silently back around the front and sat on Finn's porch steps for a few moments, scanning the environment. There was no point in knocking. Finn wasn't going to invite him in for coffee and a nice breakfast, however much he might wish it. Not now. Finn would probably never come out of the house ever again. Unless Dominic dragged him out.

* * * *

He was at his desk when Jonah arrived and did a double take. "Jesus, did you wet the bed?"

Brandon glowered at him. "Coffee's on."

Jonah went to pour a cup. "What's going on? Out with it."

"Dominic Bateman's here. He's come to take Finn home."

Jonah stopped with cup lifted to his lips. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"I met the guy in Bluey's on Saturday where he was playing not very nicely with Jordan Davies and his friend Simon. I warned him off then. Didn't realise who he was till I caught him at Finn's yesterday."

Jonah sank down at his desk. "I can't believe it. Has he hurt Finn?"

"Nah, nothing I can arrest him on yet. Finn didn't let him in. I warned him off outside, but he wasn't exactly intimidated. Fed me a pack of lies about how Finn's this self-harmer with a psychiatric history."

"That's original."

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Finn's already refused to stay with me. I can't do anything other than keep going out to his house and checking it's secure."

"If you persuade him to make a complaint, we can get a restraining order. Run Bateman out of town."

Brandon snorted. "Think Finn ever made a complaint about anything in his life? I'm on my own here. He's not going to denounce him."

"Well you're not on your own. We'll take it in turns to watch the house. We only need Bateman to make one wrong move and we've got him."

Brandon nodded, unconvinced. He picked up the phone and dialled the number of the Golden Tree hotel. "Hi, it's Sheriff Schofield here."

"Hi, Sheriff," answered the receptionist. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you have a Dominic Bateman registered there?"

"Let me check. Yes, we do, arrived Saturday."

"All right, listen to me; is he in his room now?"

"He's in the dining room at breakfast."

"Right. Every single time he leaves the hotel, I want you to call me here, do you understand?"

The receptionist stammered in surprise. "Well, sure but—"

"And pass that on to the other staff. Day or night, you call me when he

leaves the hotel. You got that?"

"Yes, Sheriff."

"Thank you. Good day." Brandon hung up.

"Careful," Jonah said with a dry smirk. "The asshole'll be protesting police harassment."

"Hopefully."

* * * *

Finn glanced at the alarm clock and then pulled the covers up over his head again. He had an appointment with Naomi to have his arm dressed in two hours, but it wasn't even an option to leave the house. Dominic would probably kill him if he got his hands on him. Especially as Brandon had gotten himself involved, showed his feelings for Finn a little too easily while rolling around in the dirt with Dominic. What was he going to do?

Dominic had managed to say a few things through the door to Finn before Brandon turned up. He had spoke of love and longing and how Finn had left an empty hole in his life. He had spoken of mistakes they had both made in the past and how he could see he was nothing without Finn and needed him to come back. Finn had remembered distant times, when Dominic had treated him like a person and not a possession. When he hadn't been afraid to even be in the same room as him.

And he thought to himself, lying there in bed, did he somehow run away from Dominic once again and run forever, looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life or did he go back to what he knew and where he belonged?

Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday morning dawned grey and rainy. Brandon and Jonah stood together under one umbrella at the graveside while the priest intoned the litany. On the other side, Rosaline Baxter's sister wept inconsolably, and her parents did likewise. A ludicrous request by Reuben Baxter to attend the funeral had been turned down. He had been remanded without bail that morning in court, and his trial was set for two months hence.

The graveyard was picturesque. It stood on the hill above town, a fine view from here of the lake and Finn's house. Brandon thought he would go out of his mind with worry. He didn't want to bide his time until Dominic committed some crime against Finn that Brandon could arrest him for. He wanted Dominic gone and Finn still here, safe. Would Finn go back with him? The idea wasn't unreasonable. After ten years, why should Finn hold firm now? The choice was stay here lonely and miserable or go back to what he knew. Brandon doubted *he* would feature in Finn's decision. He wasn't quite so important a figure in Finn's life as Finn was in his, he was sure of that.

The service finished. The sad group trailed back down to town and a wake in the upstairs room of Bluey's bar.

Brandon and Jonah thought it best not to attend. The dagger-like looks of the family across the grave were hardly encouraging. They both got a drink downstairs and sat miserably at the bar. They were on duty, but neither much cared.

Brandon leaned his head on his hand. "What am I going to do? I feel like Finn is another murder just waiting to happen."

"Want me to go over and talk to him?"

"He won't listen, Jonah. I know he won't."

"Then you go over and try again." Jonah finished his beer and stood, putting his hat on. "While I go over and make the acquaintance of the charming

Mr Bateman."

* * * *

A car was parked outside Finn's house, and Brandon frowned with heart beating hard, trying to place it. He climbed the porch steps and knocked firmly. After a moment or two, he pushed the letterbox open.

"It's me, Finn."

Heavy bolts slid back. Brandon had hardly expected it to be so easy. The door swung open and he was confronted with Naomi Brooks.

"Hey, Brandon. Finn missed his appointment yesterday. I came over to make a house call."

"That's very charitable of you."

"Come in."

Naomi stepped back, and Brandon entered the house. He watched as she locked the door, slid the bolts and safety chain into place. Did she know? Had Finn told her Dominic was here?

He followed her up the stairs and into the bedroom.

Finn reclined on the bed, naked apart from a pair of pyjama bottoms, his arm and chest freshly dressed. Brandon stood in the doorway and suddenly, such pure, unbridled lust hit him that it almost left him senseless.

Finn stared back, perhaps seeing the look on Brandon's face, and drew his knees up to his chest.

"I was just leaving," Naomi said, looking from one to the other. "Can I do anything for you, Finn, before I leave? Make you some food?"

"No thanks, Naomi. Thanks very much for coming over. I appreciate it." Finn got up off the bed.

"You stay there," Naomi told him, lifting her bag. "I can find my own way out."

"I'll just come lock the door."

"I'll do it," Brandon told him and followed Naomi out onto the landing. The two descended the stairs. "Is he okay?" Brandon asked Naomi in a low voice as he unlocked the door.

"You tell me." She stood looking at him.

"All right, look. He's here. Finn's... ex."

"What? Oh Jesus."

"I warned him off. He knows I'm watching him."

Naomi stepped out onto the porch. "You protect him, Brandon. I mean it."

"I will," Brandon said. "You don't have to worry about that."

Naomi regarded him a moment longer before she went down the steps and got into her car. She looked unhappy as she turned it around and bumped down the lane.

Brandon locked the door and applied the bolts and chain. He climbed the stairs slowly to Finn with the heaviness of both desire and apprehension pulling at him.

Finn stood at the window, looking out over the back garden. The curve of his bare, scarred back was elegant and undeniably beautiful.

"Someone should paint you."

Finn turned around. "What?"

"You should be down on canvas. You're beautiful."

Finn's expression settled into that wary one Brandon was more than used to. "Look, I only let you in because Naomi made me. You should go." He reached for a t-shirt.

"Don't cover it up. I want to look at you."

Finn stared at him. Brandon stood watching with the blood roaring in his ears and his erection straining his pants. Oh Jesus, he wanted Finn more than he ever had.

Finn remained there against the window, lean torso with bruises almost faded, sharp hips, the bandage against his pale skin. Brandon wanted to taste him. He wanted to bury himself in Finn and never come out alive.

He stepped forward. Finn stepped back, backside bumping the window sill. Brandon's gaze dipped into the groin of Finn's flimsy pyjama pants, found a promising bulge there that almost made him groan.

"Oh Finn, I want you so much it hurts."

Finn darted away from the window. Brandon caught him by the wrist.
"Listen to me."

"No, you listen to me." And Brandon followed the direction of Finn's gaze and focused on a canvas bag standing open on the floor by the bed, stuffed with clothes.

Brandon let him go, stepping back, shaking his head. "No."

"Brandon you don't understand. I belong there with him. What am I going to do? Keep running?"

"No. Stay here with me."

"Jesus, what are you going to give me?"

"Whatever you want. Anything. Everything he never gave you."

Finn turned his face away. "Go, Brandon. I told you we were done. I meant it."

"I can't. Don't ask me to. I won't let you go." Brandon caught hold of Finn, and Finn fought him fiercely.

They struggled until Brandon got both arms around him. Finn pounded at his chest with both fists. Tears streaked his cheeks, and he cried at Brandon to let him go.

"I love you, Finn." The words spilled from Brandon's lips before he could consciously think about them.

Abruptly Finn collapsed against him. He clutched hard at Brandon, holding him possessively, and Brandon lifted Finn's chin with one hand and kissed him.

Finn gasped. He clung to Brandon's neck, mouth opening, tongue seeking his, returning the kiss with such passion that Brandon lost his breath and his senses.

His hands stroked the smooth contours of Finn's face. They slid over his shoulders and down his back. He scooped Finn closer, hands on his ass, grinding him against his erection, and Finn moaned. His mouth broke from Brandon's. He showered hot kisses over his neck and face, and Brandon stood and accepted every one like a man dying of thirst in the desert.

He held Finn's head to him, stroking his hair, kissing his ear, his jaw. Finn let out a sobbing breath and kissed him again, so Brandon tasted his tears and held him even closer.

For a moment they were still, holding each other, with Brandon's desire eating him alive. Then Finn let him go and stepped back towards the bed. He fell there, wriggled out of his pants instantly, tossed them away and lay naked for Brandon's attention, legs spread wantonly.

Brandon cursed. For a moment he drank in the sight of Finn's hard cock lying against his belly, the neat thatch of dark hair and his tight little balls. Then he reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet.

Finn wiped his eyes dry. He watched as Brandon fished about in it and then he gave a little moan of excitement as Brandon extracted a condom and tossed it to him.

"You got lube to go with that, Mister?" he asked provocatively.

Brandon smiled and threw a small sachet of lube Finn's way. He was never a man to get caught short and no way would he have been unprepared on the most important day of his life.

He approached the bed, captured one of Finn's legs and lifted it, pressing a kiss to the scar on his ankle. Finn watched, wide-eyed. He squirmed as Brandon crawled up the bed, pressing kisses to his inner thigh before running a tongue slowly over Finn's sac.

"Fuck." Finn caught him by the hair.

Brandon smiled. He sucked one ball into his mouth and as he did, he reached for Finn's cock and closed his fingers around the hard shaft.

Finn whimpered. He trembled all over as Brandon's mouth found the base

of his cock and moved up it, tongue and lips working together. He watched through his lashes as Brandon ran his tongue slowly over the head of his cock, leaving it glistening wet.

Finn's hips bucked up. He grabbed Brandon's hand and guided it blatantly between his legs. While Brandon sank down on Finn's cock, swallowing it almost whole, he felt between Finn's buttocks, locating the tight little entrance and stroking.

Finn writhed, breathing heavily. He pushed against Brandon's finger as it sank into him. "Please...please..."

Brandon slid off his cock and flicked his tongue against the leaking slit. "Please what?"

"Fuck me, oh God, Brandon fuck me. I need you inside me."

Brandon was pretty sure he was going to come before he got his pants open. He got up off the bed, virtually tearing his clothes off, and preened at the excitement on Finn's face as he uncovered his body.

Finn grabbed him by the cock as he knelt back on the bed and pulled Brandon forward. Their bodies entwined as they kissed, erection against erection, Finn's mouth scorching Brandon alive.

He couldn't wait. He knelt back, tore the condom open, and rolled it on as quickly as he could, while reaching for the lube. He covered the latex with half the sachet and left the other half for Finn.

"Turn over."

Finn did as he was told, on hands and knees, legs spread.

Brandon started in the centre of his back. He kissed the crisscross pattern of scars, following them down to Finn's buttocks, which were also scarred. He kissed every inch, one hand feeling around for Finn's cock.

Finn swayed, groaning, a hand over Brandon's, encouraging him to jerk him off. But Brandon drew his hand back. He spread Finn's perfect peach-like buttocks apart and saw what lay between them.

Finn whimpered with need. Brandon leaned down. He rimmed the tight

little entrance lightly and Finn almost shot off the bed.

"Oh my God, oh my God."

"You like?"

"Oh my God, yes I like. Do it again, please."

Brandon dragged his tongue up and down the sensitive skin, leaving it wet. He probed it with his finger, rubbing slowly.

Finn trembled. One hand reached behind him, feeling for Brandon's cock, stroking it through the latex.

Brandon rimmed him again. Finn liked that way too much, and Brandon liked doing it. If he wasn't careful he would get carried away and make Finn come before he was inside him. He took the rest of the lube on his fingers and then brought them to Finn.

Finn flinched at the cold gel and groaned loudly as Brandon worked it in thoroughly, opening him up gently.

For a moment he wondered if Finn had been this enthusiastic and wanton with Dominic. If he had been, what exactly was there to complain about? Christ, Brandon could stay here in Finn's bed until he died from pleasure without once protesting.

He withdrew his slick fingers. "Turn back over."

Finn did so eagerly. He was flushed, his eyes bright. He pulled Brandon forward by the hips.

Brandon took hold of his cock. He guided it between Finn's cheeks as Finn lifted his legs and wrapped them around Brandon's back.

Brandon watched his lover's face as he pushed into him slowly, inch by inch until he was sheathed, all the way inside.

Finn breathed heavily, eyes closed, mouth open. He reached down to touch his own cock, and Brandon watched him masturbate, transfixed.

He leaned down over Finn, crushing him into the bed. Finn turned his head, and their lips collided fiercely. Brandon thrust into him.

Finn cried out, hands gripping hard at his lover's back, heels drumming

against him. Brandon smothered the cry. Their lips remained joined, breath spilling into each other's mouth. Brandon was consumed whole. If this wasn't the most perfect moment of his life, he didn't know what was. All past lovers were eclipsed. There was only Finn right now, and he was sure there would only ever be Finn.

He pushed Finn's hand away and jerked him off with slow, smooth strokes.

Gasping, Finn threw his head back. He met Brandon's every thrust with a jerk of his hips, taking him deeply into him every time.

Brandon kissed his throat. The words spilled again from his lips. "I love you, Finn. I love you."

Finn wailed. He tightened hard around Brandon, bucking up into his hand as he spent across himself in creamy white ribbons.

Brandon groaned at the sight. He brought his hand to his mouth and sucked the semen off his thumb and then he bent his head and kissed Finn once more as he came.

Chapter Eighteen

Jonah caught Dominic as he was leaving the Golden Tree hotel. "Hi, there." He blocked Dominic's way as Dominic tried to walk around him. "Jonah Mitchell, deputy sheriff."

Dominic glowered at him, ignoring his hand.

"I believe you met my boss the other day."

"If you mean your asshole sheriff, sure."

Jonah stepped closer. "I think he gave you warning. I've come to reiterate that. Just so you understand us. We don't tolerate abusive scumbags in our town. We don't tolerate people who think they're real men by picking on those weaker than themselves. We happen to think they're the lowest of the low."

Dominic's lip curled. "I don't have to speak to you."

Jonah caught him hard by the arm. "This is the only warning you're going to get from me. You so much as spit on the sidewalk and you're locked up. Got it?"

Dominic pulled his arm away. His eyes sparked hatred. He got into a silver car parked outside the hotel and drove away.

At that moment, Jonah almost wished Dominic would try something with Finn, just for the supreme pleasure of arresting him.

* * * *

Finn lay curled against Brandon, head on his chest. Brandon stroked his sweat-dampened hair gently, feathering kisses over Finn's closed eyes.

Finn's lashes fluttered up. He lifted his head, and looked up at Brandon through clear, dark blue eyes. Brandon's heart stuttered a moment in his chest before it sped up, pounding, aching.

He smoothed his fingers over Finn's satin soft cheek before tracing the

outline of his small, perfect mouth. In time, he'd like that mouth all over him. That would suit him just right.

"You might have given me advance warning that you were going to blow my head off."

Finn's face split into a smile. "Shut up."

Brandon's arms tightened possessively around him. "And advance warning you were going to smile because now I think I've died and gone to heaven."

Finn shrugged away from him, blushing.

"Where are you going? Think I've finished with you yet?"

Finn sat on the edge of the bed, found his pyjama pants and pulled them on. "This doesn't change anything, Brandon."

Brandon's hopes and dreams deflated as rapidly as his second hard-on. He slid from the bed, looking for his underwear.

He stepped in front of Finn as he tried to leave the room. "Are you serious? You're still going back to him after what's just happened? He'll kill you if he finds out you've been with me."

Finn shook his head. "He won't find out, if you just go now."

"I'm not leaving, Finn. Do you really think I'd just go? What sort of man would I be if I walked out of here and left you to his mercy?"

Finn paled. He swallowed. He caught Brandon's hands in his, his voice an urgent whisper. "Just let it go Brandon. Just let me go. Please."

Brandon shook his head. "You idiot, you absolute fucking idiot. All your self-preservation is gone, isn't it? You just offer yourself up to him like a sacrifice with no thought to anything except your own fucking misery. No thought to the fact that when you go and when he takes you back to Iowa and kills you, you take my heart with you and he kills me too."

Finn's mouth opened in shock. Tears hung suspended from too-full eyes.

Brandon grabbed all his clothes up from the floor. He pushed Finn away when he reached out to him, went into the bathroom and locked the door.

* * * *

Finn was lying motionless beneath the covers when Brandon came out fully dressed. He hovered a moment at the door, torn, desolate. But Finn had made his mind up even before the delightful interlude that had just occurred, and Brandon had made his mind up before today to let him go.

It was all done. Finn would go back to his old life, and Dominic would rise ably to the challenge of finding bones that were as yet unbroken. Brandon would stay here and wonder every day whether Finn was alive or dead and mourn him like he was already under ground.

"Is he a cop?" he asked from the doorway.

Finn answered without lifting his head to look at him. "Sure he's a cop. How do you think he found me?"

Brandon turned away. He went down the stairs slowly and unlocked the door, pulling back the safety chain and bolts for the last time. He was about to call up to Finn and tell him to come lock the door behind him when he remembered.

Finn wanted Dominic to come.

* * * *

Finn dragged himself finally from the tangle of bed sheets. The room smelled of sweat and sex. He had no energy to shower. He finished shoving clothes into the rucksack and then he dressed.

He sat on his bed waiting.

After half an hour of silence he heard a car pull up outside and a door slam. Heavy footsteps sounded on the porch, and for one desperate moment, Finn prayed Brandon had come back.

A knock came at the door. The letterbox rattled. "Finn, baby, it's me. Just come to talk again. I didn't get the chance to say everything I wanted to say the other day."

Finn got up. Slowly he walked downstairs. He looked at the unfastened

bolts, the safety chain dangling, all his precautions wasted and pointless. Because it was always going to come back to this.

He took a deep breath and preparing to fall back into his old life, he pulled open the door.

Dominic's handsome face beamed with a smile. "Oh my love, thank you for seeing me."

Finn stood back and held the door open.

Dominic entered. Finn flinched as he heard one of the bolts slide into place. He kept his back straight and his head up. He could do this. He went into the kitchen and glanced at the unused kettle.

"It's hot out. Can I get you a cold drink, Dom?"

"No, I'll have some tea please."

Finn stuttered. "I—I don't have any."

"You don't?" Dominic entered the room, reached to open the cupboard over the kettle. "This will do fine, Finn." He let the box of tea-bags drop onto the work surface and turned away, looking out over the garden.

Finn loitered, trembling.

"What's the matter? You don't trust me with the kettle, Finn? I thought you knew that was a mistake. You know I didn't mean it, it's just you made me so mad."

"I'd rather give you a cold drink," Finn said.

"And I said I'd rather have tea. We're not going to get anything straightened out here if you're just going to argue with me over the drinks are we?"

Finn shook his head. He took the kettle to the sink and filled it. Then he set it back down and flicked the switch to boil.

Dominic sat at the table looking satisfied. "Nice house, Finn. This must have cost you a pretty penny of the money you stole from me."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are. Are you coming back with me?"

"Yes."

Dominic looked shocked for a moment before he grinned. He jumped up and swept a stiff Finn into his arms, whooping in delight. "Oh, I knew you would. You won't regret it. I promise." He forced a kiss on Finn's lips, and Finn turned his head away.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

Dominic turned Finn's face to his with one cruel hand. "Then kiss me."

Finn closed his eyes. Clenching his fists, he pursed his lips and let Dominic take them.

Dominic squeezed his ass. "Let's celebrate. I'll take you out for the best meal this hick town can offer."

"No, I... let's just go, Dom. I want to get back home."

Dominic let him go and stood back a little to regard him. "What's the rush?"

"No rush I just... don't like it here."

"Worried that sheriff friend of yours'll try to stop me taking you?"

"No." Finn was already blushing hopelessly.

Dominic caught him by his scarred arm hard, and Finn bit the insides of his mouth to keep from yelling. "He's a little soft on you isn't he?"

"Is he? I hadn't noticed." Behind Finn the kettle started to emit steam.

"You hadn't noticed?" Dominic's fingers dug in. "He throws me down in the dirt and threatens me with bodily harm defending your honour and you hadn't noticed?"

"He's a little... unorthodox. Watches too many cop shows."

"Yeah? Is he unorthodox in bed too?"

"I wouldn't know."

Dominic let him go. He stepped back and laughed loudly. "You always have been the worst liar ever, Finn. Remember when you fucked those friends of mine and tried to pretend afterwards that you didn't enjoy it, even though you

came your brains out?"

Finn reddened. Behind him the kettle flicked off with a loud click, making him jump. Dominic referred to the time four of his friends had used him. Finn had no choice but to come because Dominic had got in there and sucked his cock until he did. The video had been passed around Dominic's circle for months and each of his friends had wanted a piece of Finn.

"I'm not lying, Dom. Why would I want to screw some cop when I knew you were waiting at home for me ready to take me back? Have I ever been unfaithful to you?"

"Not that I know of, but then you'd hardly tell me would you, Finn?"

"Yes, I would. I don't hide anything from you. And besides, I thought you liked to see me with other men?"

"I do."

"So if I was going to screw the sheriff, I'd wait until you were watching, wouldn't I?"

Dominic gave a reluctant smile. "He is kind of hot. I'd like to see him pounding your tight little ass. Shall I ask him?"

"I think we should just go, baby."

"Spoilsport. It's been so long."

"I know it has, but when we get home things will be better, won't they?" Finn looked up at Dominic hopefully.

"Sure they will." Dominic passed rough fingers across his cheek. "Make my tea while I take a piss." He loped up the stairs on long legs.

For a moment Finn stared down at the hall at the front door and his final chance of escape.

Upstairs he heard the toilet flush and the water run. Then it went absolutely still for an instant before the bathroom door opened and footsteps sounded on the stairs.

It was all over. Finn had missed his chance, and he only had himself to blame.

Dominic appeared in the kitchen with face like thunder. "What's this?" He held up a condom filled with a large amount of semen.

Chapter Nineteen

Finn stammered as he always did when he lied. "It's... two kids that I let use my spare room sometimes to fool around. They have s-strict families."

Dominic slapped him in the face with the condom. "Do I look like an idiot?" he roared.

"N-no."

He was well trained at dodging Dominic's fists by now but still, when it came, he wasn't quick enough. The fist caught him a stinging blow on the temple. He fell against the table, and Dominic dragged him back and slammed him face first into the fridge.

Finn sprawled untidily on the floor, seeing stars, gasping like a beached fish.

Dominic straddled his hips. "Now we'll try again. Whose condom is it?"

"It's... it's... the cop's, Brandon's."

A hand pressed against his throat. Dominic's eyes blazed. "And he used it on you did he?"

"Yes. Forgive me, Dominic. I missed you."

Dominic yelled. He got up, and Finn scrambled to his feet, looking around for a weapon. Dominic found one first out of the drawer by the fridge. A carving knife.

"You stupid, duplicitous little twat. Is this all the thanks I get for giving you a roof over your head for all these years when no other fucker would have anything to do with you?"

He lunged at Finn, slicing open his shirt and left forearm. Finn cried out. He danced back, around the table, putting it between them. If he lured Dominic the wrong way, he could run for the door. But Dominic had put the bolt on. By the time Finn got it open, the knife would be between his shoulders.

He felt almost resigned. He had been in this situation many times before

and knew the way it went. A trip to the hospital beckoned at the end of it, but the way Dominic looked, Finn suspected he had the mortuary in mind. He could barely bring himself to care.

But still, self-preservation was strong. He darted around the table, and Dominic caught him by the scruff of the neck, threw him against the work surface and stabbed him through the left shoulder.

Finn screamed. Dominic withdrew the knife through ruined muscle and tissue. White-hot pain dulled Finn's vision. He felt behind him. His hand clasped around the handle of the kettle and as Dominic pressed the knife against his throat, drawing blood along the blade's path, Finn swung the kettle.

Dominic bellowed. He staggered back, dropped the knife and held his face as Finn bowled past him.

The run to the front door seemed like a sprint of epic proportions. It loomed up before him like the most impossible of sanctuaries, and for the first time, Finn cursed his security measures. All they had done was keep him locked in with his abuser, and they were about to be the death of him.

His hand was slick with blood as he fumbled at the bolt and then hot breath was upon him. He was dragged backwards by the hair, down the hall, thrown full length onto the floor in the kitchen doorway. Finn looked up into the burned face of his tormentor and knew this was it.

* * * *

"You look like it went well." Jonah threw his hat on his desk and went to the coffee machine.

Brandon sat slumped at his desk. "I'm done with him. He's going back to Iowa."

"Jesus Christ, you have to stop him."

"I tried."

"Try harder!"

Brandon got up. He stared hard at Jonah. "Listen to me, I can't do any more than I have. He has his bag packed and he's going."

"What the fuck is wrong with him?"

"I guess being out in the real world is scarier than what he knows."

"Oh fuck. This is so fucked up." Jonah looked as distressed as Brandon felt.

Brandon topped his coffee up. He stood drinking, looking out over the town square. He felt Finn's skin still pressed against his own and tasted the sweetness of his mouth. Finn was on borrowed time. He was about to cease to exist. Brandon and Jonah knew that, and Brandon guessed Finn did too.

He put his cup down, took his keys and left without a word.

* * * *

"I should have killed you years ago." Dominic swiped at one cheek, slicing it open. The heat from his burned skin seared Finn.

He punched Dominic in the face and was rewarded with the knife pressing into his throat.

"You *did* kill me years ago. As soon as you took me into that house I was a dead man," Finn cried. "You can't do anything to me now that I haven't waited for."

Dominic's burned mouth twisted into a rictus grin. He dragged the knife down Finn's torso to press through his clothes and into his abdomen. "I'm going to gut you like a fish. I'm going to cut off those parts of you that the sheriff is evidently so enamoured with and stuff them in your mouth. He's going to find you here, mutilated beyond all recognition and he's going to have nightmares the rest of his life. All because he took what was never his to take."

The blade pressed into Finn's stomach, and he caught his breath on a wave of agony.

Dominic withdrew the knife. He held it up in both hands, poised to bring it

down into Finn's heart and Finn looked up at the last ten years of his life and asked himself, as he had a thousand times before, how he had ever allowed it to come to this.

* * * *

A silver car stood outside Finn's house, and Brandon's heart leapt into his mouth as he threw himself from the car, leaving the engine running. He sprang onto the porch, unsnapping his holster as he did, put his foot to the door and threw all his weight behind it.

The wood around the frame splintered apart with surprising ease, and the door flew open. There, as Brandon drew his gun and levelled it, he saw Dominic with knife raised, about to end this tale for good.

He didn't feel it necessary to give fair warning. Not now. Still though, he didn't shoot to kill. He squeezed the trigger, hitting Dominic in one large bicep, and watched the muscle and blood which sprayed from the wound.

Dominic grunted. He merely fumbled the knife to his other hand as though this were an inconvenience and commenced with attempting to cut Finn's throat.

Finn screamed beneath him, struggling wildly and there was blood, so much blood. Brandon lifted his gun higher and with perfect calm, shot Dominic in the head.

Blood and brain exploded from the left side of his skull as the bullet exited, and Dominic toppled over almost in slow-motion, the knife clattering to the ground.

Gasping split the sudden silence. Finn lay ashen-faced, arms thrown out as though to grasp at any help he could find.

Brandon holstered his gun. He walked down the hall, one eye on Dominic Bateman's body, and got to his knees beside Finn. Carefully he pulled the limp body into his arms, pressing his handkerchief to the bleeding wound at Finn's throat. He cradled Finn there as he reached for his radio, and Finn stared up at

him a moment with large, dark blue eyes before his thick lashes fluttered closed.

Chapter Twenty

Finn woke under white sheets and sounds of soft-soled footsteps retreating up the corridor outside his room. He looked at the cannulas in both his hands and followed the red line from his right hand up to a bag of blood hanging above him. Reading the type on the side, *B positive*, he almost laughed. That seemed to be some sort of message to him rather than his blood group. The familiar dressing on his right arm now had a matching one on his left. Finn lifted his right hand to feel the dressing around his throat and noted how much it hurt when he swallowed. His mouth was dry. He turned his head, seeking fluid on the bedside table and finding nothing. He glanced anxiously towards the door as he tried to remember just how he had got here.

Oh God. Brandon had shot Dominic. Finn had seen the bullet enter his right temple and explode out of his left. He had watched the life immediately extinguished from those electric blue eyes and for a moment he had felt deep loss and devastation.

He lay there with gaze fixed on the cream-coloured ceiling. The man who had controlled his life for ten years was gone. His reason for living, the one who guided his every thought and action. Now Finn would have to have his own life. He would have to go out to the store and get his own groceries. He would have to talk to people. He would have to work. He would have to think for himself.

Terror seized him. He couldn't do it. He didn't know how. Even the past few weeks in Clear Water Creek had been the most terrible strain, forced into socialising and being pleasant and...

No one had forced him into anything with Brandon. Finn had *wanted* that. He'd wanted Brandon like nothing he'd ever wanted before. Now Brandon had eliminated the opposition. He would claim Finn and Finn would go back to being a kept man with no thoughts of his own. Which would probably be for the best, but still Finn railed against it. He was afraid. Afraid of the strength of his

feelings for Brandon and the precipice he now hung onto.

He put a hand to the line carrying blood into his hand, fingers closing around it. Should he run away before Brandon came for him? Disappear into the ether and stand alone for the first time? But Brandon would find him. He was a cop like Dominic and would have that same bloodhound instinct. He would look for Finn as long as it took and bring him back. He stifled a sound of distress.

"Don't pull at that."

Finn started, glance flicking to the nurse in pink scrubs who stood on his left holding a water jug and plastic glass.

"How are you doing?" She smiled, all white teeth and sparkling green eyes.

Finn closed his eyes and took some deep breaths. "I'm okay."

"Your visitor just left. The sheriff."

Finn fixed his gaze on hers. "When can I go?"

"When you're fit, which isn't right now. What's the rush?"

Finn moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "Can I have a drink?"

"Sure you can." The nurse put the jug down on his table and poured a glass, retrieving a bendy straw from her pocket. "Let's sit you up. Tell me if it hurts too much." She reached for the remote at the side of his bed and Finn was lifted slowly to a sitting position, wincing at the strain on his wounded abdomen.

"That okay?"

"Yeah."

His nurse leaned over him, holding the straw to his lips. Finn drank thirstily, the entire cup in one go. He flinched as his nurse brushed his hair back from his forehead with a tender hand.

"You're sweating."

"I have to go."

"Just relax. Take some deep breaths."

"Do you know about me?" Finn asked her abruptly. *Do you know my shame? That I'm less than half a man?*

"Yes."

"And what do you think?"

"I don't think anything. I'm here to look after you."

"You don't think... I deserved everything I got and he should have killed me?"

"Finn, Finn." The nurse sat on the edge of his bed and stroked his hand. "What is this? Why would I think that about you, and more importantly why would you think it about yourself?"

Finn turned his head away. "He should have killed me years ago. I should have let him."

* * * *

Brandon came back later that night and to his distress, found Finn's hands tied to the bed with restraints. His nurse motioned him into the corridor.

"We had to restrain him and give him a light sedative," she said apologetically. "He became very upset. He tried to rip his lines out and leave."

Brandon sighed. He hadn't expected Finn to take his near death and Dominic's killing easily, but still... he hadn't expected the same obstruction and denial he had faced from Finn since the beginning. There was obviously still a long way to go.

"He said..." Finn's nurse hesitated. "He didn't want you to come. That I should stop you coming."

Brandon nodded resignedly. That was familiar and expected. Finn wasn't behaving out of the ordinary after all. Same old Finn. He would have almost smiled if his guts weren't twisted up inside and his heart wasn't held in the palm of the man lying restrained to the bed.

"Thank you," he said and walked away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Brandon expected every time he called that Finn would have been declared sane, released from his restraints and disappeared into the wilderness, never to return.

But on the fifth day, Finn was being discharged and Brandon hurried to be there before he could leave. He was assured Finn was still in his room, waiting for medication to take home, so Brandon loitered in the corridor, eye on the door.

Time dragged on. Brandon got some wishy-washy vending machine coffee, took one sip and threw it away. The nurses watched him, blushing prettily from the other side of their station, and one brought him a mug of tea. Brandon knew all about uniform fetish. Hell, he had probably had it himself when he came into this job. The sight of the uniform, the gun, cuffs and nightstick on the belt, the badge, the authority, it all tended to conspire to make some people weak at the knees. He wasn't sure it had ever done that to Finn. But then Finn was a good actor until he was lying on his back having the time of his life.

He sat down, deep in thought. The door had opened and a figure shuffled right past him before he realised. Brandon got to his feet.

Finn retreated down the corridor, wearing a set of clothes that must have been appropriated from the hospital lost property department and looked like they might have suited Charlie Chaplin better. The pants were baggy and too long, falling from Finn's slender hips. The cuffs of his shirt, a lemony yellow, drowned him.

Brandon couldn't help but smile. He had the urge to snap a photo. Instead, he strode after Finn, waiting until he passed the automatic doors to catch up with him.

Finn's head jerked up from his contemplation of the ground as he sensed Brandon at his side.

"Go away." He hurried out of the hospital grounds towards the road, limp pronounced.

"Where are you going?"

"To catch the bus."

"Have you got money?"

"They gave me some bus fare. I'm going back to my house to get my bag and then I'm..."

"Your house is a crime scene. I've got your bag."

Finn stopped, turned on him fiercely. "Then give it back to me."

"I will, but Finn," Brandon put a hand on his lower back, "let me drive you."

Finn carried a paper bag of drugs. He clutched it to him as though Brandon would snatch it away. "Just leave me alone." He checked the road cursorily before crossing, sinking down at a bench by the bus stop as though the walk had exhausted him.

Brandon bent down before him, hands on the bench on either side of Finn. "Listen to me. I saved your life. I didn't know any other way to do that other than to kill him. You can't blame me for it."

Finn lifted his head. His face was pale, his eyes sapphire. "Can't I?"

"What did you want me to do?"

"Mind your own business like I told you all along."

"And let him kill you?"

Finn looked away, jaw clenched tight and pulsing.

Brandon straightened up. "Don't tell me you're actually grieving for that monster."

Finn surged to his feet. "Go to hell," he said between his teeth, squaring up to Brandon. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I have an idea. He controlled your life. Told you how to think, behave, dress. He kept you in the house. You had no friends and weren't allowed to make any. Now I've taken him away, cast you into the wilderness, and you don't know

how you're going to make it on your own. Thing is Finn, you're not on your own."

Finn stared up at him in anguish. "And you just can't wait to replace him can you?"

Brandon frowned. He didn't much like his motives being compared to Dominic's. "Have I ever once given you a hint I could behave like him, Finn?" He took Finn's chin in his hand and made Finn look at him. "Have I?"

Finn shut his eyes. His lashes trembled. "I hate that you saw me that way," he said on a wet breath. "I hate that you knew my shame and what I let him do to me. I don't know how I can ever get past that."

Brandon's fingers caressed Finn's jaw lightly. His hand moved around to cup the back of Finn's head tenderly. "All these derogatory thoughts you imagine I have about you, they're all in your own head. They're all thoughts you think about yourself and in time, when you're strong again, you'll be able to let them go and realise that the only things I ever thought about you were: A, I wanted to protect you at all costs and B, I've loved you since the moment I met you."

Finn's beautiful eyes lifted to his.

"I know it's asking a lot for you to trust me and I know I bent some of that trust when I killed Dominic, but I'm not going anywhere. I have all the time in the world. Now what say I drive you back, we sit and have a drink and a chat about what you want to do?"

Finn held eye contact with him for the longest time, before giving the most imperceptible of nods. He followed Brandon back to his car, tripping over his baggy pants.

* * * *

With relief, Finn took his bag up to Brandon's bathroom, stripped off his clothes and pulled on his own jeans and shirt, careful about the dressings on his arms, throat and torso. He stood and looked in the mirror for the first time in a

long while. He was a sickly colour, too thin, almost emaciated, his eyes huge and haunted. What exactly did Brandon see that attracted him? He remembered the words Brandon had said after they'd slept together. About Finn blowing his head off. Spoken in a tone of such adoration it frightened him. Finn didn't know anything about being the subject of someone's adoration. Or perhaps he did. Perhaps Dominic's ten-year campaign of violence and intimidation was his own particular brand of adoration. In which case, Finn didn't want to ever be adored by anyone again.

He'd sat next to Brandon in his car, watching him from the corner of his eye, noting the strong hands on the wheel, the bare, tanned forearms lightly dusted with dark hair, the smooth, taut jaw and the long lashes blinking gracefully over those coal-dark eyes. Finn had felt a stirring of inappropriate arousal. Startlingly sexual images had come into his mind. Like Brandon taking him over the burning hot hood with the sun kissing his anaemic skin all the while.

Even after Dominic's death, his new found sex drive remained intact. That was something to thank Brandon for. He had healed at least part of Finn's shattered soul and wanted to be around to heal the rest.

His unsteady legs made Finn perch on the edge of the bathtub. He could do this. He could take the first step to normality. Just one step at a time was all he needed.

* * * *

Brandon leaned against the sink waiting. Two glasses of cranberry juice sat on the kitchen table before him. Finn had been quite vehement in refusing a hot drink and Brandon guessed he never wanted to be near a boiling kettle again.

Was Finn going to come out of the bathroom with fresh determination to make it on his own or with his sights set on the even harder path—that of trusting Brandon and letting him into his heart?

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, the bottom one creaking as it always did and Brandon relaxed his tense posture, smiled reassuringly at Finn as he came through the door. Finn didn't return it; he pulled a chair out and sat down, mumbling thank you for his drink.

Brandon sat opposite him. Really he should have been getting back to work, but Jonah had told him to take all the time he needed. He fixed his gaze on Finn, drinking in his beauty.

Finn took a sip of juice. He glanced up at Brandon. "So, what did you have in mind?"

"What do you mean?"

"For me. Your plans."

Brandon frowned. "I don't make plans for other people, Finn. You make your own plans."

"Okay, I'll rephrase the question. What would you like to see happen?"

Brandon hesitated, treading carefully. "For you to stay here with me. Until you're back on your feet."

"And where would I sleep?" Finn's stare was penetrating, almost challenging. Like he was waiting for Brandon to say something outrageous, which would break the deal. Brandon made sure to keep his voice soft and placating.

"Wherever you want. I have a spare room."

"I don't have any money."

"I don't care about that. If you want to get a job, when you're feeling better, that's up to you."

Finn bowed his head, hands around his glass. "The only job I've ever had in my life is waiting tables."

"Nothing wrong with that. Would you want to do that again?"

"Not really."

"What interests do you have?"

Finn hesitated. "I used to like to draw at school." He slid from his chair.

"Let me show you something." He went into the living room where he'd left his bag, scrabbled in the front pocket and withdrew a crumpled sheet of paper. He came back to the table and retook his seat, pushing the paper across to Brandon.

Brandon unfolded it and was confronted with a pencil portrait of himself. He stood on Finn's porch, arms folded across his broad chest, looking off into the distance. The details of his uniform, the holster holding his gun, the badge on his chest, were lavish. As was the tightness of his pants.

He grinned sheepishly. "I'm not sure I pack as much as this picture seems to suggest, Finn," he remarked.

"You do," Finn said. "I drew that picture after I stood watching you while you sat on my porch. Before you kissed me. And I felt just how much you were packing."

Brandon's cheeks heated. "You sure know how to give a compliment, Mr Austen."

"I'd love to draw you naked." Finn fixed unblinking eyes on his.

Brandon smiled. "And I'd love to pose for you naked. If you didn't show it around town."

Finn grinned cheekily, melting Brandon effortlessly. "It would be our secret."

Brandon looked at the sketch again. "You have some crazy talent, Finn. Ever considered art school?"

Finn looked startled. "No. I'm not good enough for that."

"Yes, you are. I'd pay for it."

Finn stared. A rush of tears made his eyes glisten. Brandon expected anger, obstruction, Finn's usual reaction to kindness. But Finn simply reached across the table, put his hand over Brandon's and held it tight.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brandon lay listening in the dark as the floorboards on the landing creaked and Finn went into the bathroom. Two weeks since he'd come out of hospital and the nightmares were a regular occurrence. The soft cry had awoken Brandon, but he knew better by now than to go in to Finn, having been rebuffed by him every time. He hadn't laid a finger on him. Finn had been a reclusive figure, sitting in Brandon's living room sketching for most of each day, occasionally venturing out for a walk and coming back shaking with nerves.

The toilet flushed. Water ran. The door opened and footsteps retreated down the stairs. Brandon waited a few moments, listening, before he slid from bed and padded down the stairs dressed in just his boxers.

He found Finn in the kitchen, looking through the window, drinking a glass of water. Finn saw Brandon's reflection and turned around. He was bare foot and wore nothing but a pair of pyjama pants. The stab wounds to his left forearm, shoulder and abdomen were still dressed, but the scald to his right arm had been left uncovered by Naomi that week with instructions to apply moisturising cream twice a day and keep out of the sun.

Brandon's gaze lingered on the scar. Pale pink and ridged unevenly in places, it was strangely beautiful, not ugly like he had initially thought the first time he saw it uncovered. He wanted to touch it and trace its smoothness with his lips. While Brandon looked, he realised Finn studied him in turn, eyes moving over the hard planes of his chest and stomach and down blatantly to his groin.

Brandon was helpless putty under those hot, sapphire eyes. His tight boxers became even tighter. The surge of desire was intoxicating and he was moments away from grabbing Finn. He tried to make a joke of it by leaning against the door frame, one arm raised, hip thrust out.

"See anything you like?"

Finn's eyes lifted to his. He bit his lip, nodding solemnly. Brandon's gaze travelled down his lean torso, and he watched as Finn grew hard under his very eyes, a thick bulge growing steadily in the flimsy pants.

"So what do you want to do about it?" Brandon asked provocatively.

Finn cleared his throat nervously. "I want you to take me."

Brandon almost ground his teeth in excitement. "Stay right there." He turned and nearly ran through the living room, bounding back up the stairs two at a time to scrabble in a drawer for condom and lube.

When he re-entered the kitchen, Finn was standing at the sink touching himself through his pants. Brandon stopped at the door, staring.

"Let me see."

Finn's eyes were huge with need. He hooked his thumb into the waistband of his pants and pulled them down. His cock sprang free, rock hard, and Finn used his other hand to stroke it slowly.

"Fuck." Another time when Brandon wasn't so desperate, he needed to get Finn to masturbate himself to climax while he watched because it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen. He moved forward, taking Finn lightly by the hips, pulling him against his body while he bent his head.

They kissed, Finn all excited breaths and clutching hands, his cock pressing rigidly against Brandon's. The kiss went deeper and deeper, tongues tangling, limbs entwined before Brandon's mouth found Finn's right shoulder and arm and he was tasting and touching that scar with his lips.

Finn stiffened, tried to pull him away by the hair, but Brandon stuck to his task, kissing, caressing, learning every portion of the damaged skin with hands and mouth.

Finn let out a little cry. Brandon stood upright. He pulled Finn into his arms, holding him tight, and it was at that moment that he felt Finn surrender.

He felt the fight and the denial and the fear leave his body. He felt Finn's damaged soul open up to the light and let Brandon in. He held him until Finn's mouth sought his again and their hearts and souls were fused through their kiss.

Brandon lifted Finn into his arms. He carried him into the living room and laid him down on the couch before stripping off Finn's pants and perusing him with greedy eyes. Finn reached out. He stroked the hard bulge in Brandon's boxers and then he sat up, peeled the boxers down Brandon's thighs and closed his lips around Brandon's cock.

Brandon hissed in delight as wet, velvet heat swallowed his shaft. He played lightly with Finn's hair, watching the concentration on his face as he slid up and down his cock, leaving it glistening. Ecstasy overwhelmed him. He'd imagined this before, Finn sucking him off, but had never dared to hope it would happen. But God, it was glorious. It was almost as perfect as being inside him.

Finn played with his balls, squeezing lightly. His tongue gave little darting licks to the head of Brandon's cock. Brandon pushed his boxers down and stepped out of them. In one hand he still held condom and lube. Finn's other hand stroked behind his balls. A finger probed between his buttocks. Brandon spread his feet apart. Finn zeroed in on his entrance, touching, rubbing slowly until Brandon gasped in excitement and almost rocked onto Finn's finger, encouraging him to penetrate.

Finn did so. Brandon bucked into his mouth as Finn located his prostate with ease and almost made him come right then and there. He let white-hot heat consume him a moment and then he swore, took Finn's head lightly in both hands and eased him away. Finn sat back against the couch and lifted both feet up onto the cushions, knees spread.

Brandon tore open the condom and rolled it on quickly. While he lubed it up, Finn took the bottle from him. As Brandon watched, he squeezed some onto his own fingers and reached between his legs, spreading it around his own entrance. Brandon watched, transfixed.

Finn shuffled to the very edge of the couch as Brandon knelt down before him. He grasped his shaft, pressing slowly inside as Finn's legs wrapped around him.

Finn's head fell back and he gave a low, long moan of pleasure. His body

quivered as though he were on the verge of orgasm. Brandon didn't mind. If Finn came now, he would carry on fucking him until he came again.

He sheathed himself all the way in and held still a moment, bending over Finn, lips pressed to his chest, against his scar.

"Oh God, Brandon..." Finn groaned softly.

Brandon moved slowly, taking Finn with long, smooth strokes, and Finn writhed in ecstasy under him, cock rigid and leaking against his belly. Brandon took it in his hand. He jerked Finn off in time to his thrusts, watching as a flush rose over his lover's chest and turned the rosy scar a deeper hue, enveloping his face.

His chest heaved, and he panted for breath. His hands grasped at Brandon's back, urging him closer, deeper, and their mouths joined in a heated kiss where Brandon knew without doubt, this bargain was sealed for all time.

"I love you," Finn gasped, holding Brandon's head hard. His hips bucked and he tightened in waves around Brandon, milking the climax effortlessly from him. As Finn splashed across his own chest, Brandon came with him, shuddering in long, powerful spasms that sent him out of his mind.

* * * *

Brandon only regained his senses when Finn tried to wriggle out from beneath him. He withdrew, knelt and pulled off his condom, and when Finn vacated the couch, he sat there himself, leaning back in exhaustion.

"Lie down."

Brandon opened one eye to see Finn perched naked on the chair opposite, sketch pad on his knee. The moonlight illuminating the room shone on the semen on his torso.

Brandon smiled self-consciously. He stretched out on the couch, tying a knot in the condom before letting it drop to the floor.

"Put one hand on your thigh near your cock, like you're going to touch it."

Brandon did as he was told. His cock was still half-hard, and he hoped it wouldn't go soft until Finn had sketched him.

He watched Finn as he started to draw, wishing he was lying in his arms and not across the room. He hesitated before he said, "Did you mean what you said?"

Finn's gaze swept up his body to his eyes. "Sure I did," he said almost shyly.

"You love me?"

"Yes."

Brandon smiled. "Thank you, Finn."

"What for?"

"For giving me the chance to show you how much I care."

Finn's pencil paused on the paper. He shook his head. "Thank you for giving me the chance to trust you. For not giving up on me long ago."

Brandon held his hand out. He was treacherously close to tears. Finn put the pad down quickly and came across to him, climbing onto the couch and stretching out on top of Brandon.

Brandon held him close, Finn's face against his neck and their limbs entwined. The warm weight on his body soothed him and lulled him almost into sleep.

Everything was going to be all right. He had brought Finn back from the brink and revealed the perfect beauty beneath the ruined shell. He had the man of his dreams right here in his arms, and he would set about making up for the behaviour of others to the very best of his ability.

In time, Dominic Bateman would become a distant memory. A bitter little reminder of the dark path Finn had to travel before he came into the light.

THE END

About the Author

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